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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE IMAGE OF THE TEACHER IN CANADIAN

PRAIRIE FICTION: 1921-1971

by



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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Image of the Teacher in Canadian Prairie Fiction: 1921-1971" submitted by John Edward Oster in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.





## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to determine the image of the teacher as portrayed in Canadian prairie fiction published during the past half-century. The fiction examined includes seventy novels and single-author short-story collections with a setting in the Canadian prairie provinces during the present century.

The characterization of teachers in these works of fiction depends to a large extent on the author's larger purpose, on the role the teacher plays in relation to other characters, and on whether the author is or was a teacher. Teacher-authors, in general, tend to portray teachers more frequently and more sympathetically than do authors who have had no teaching experience.

Male teachers are less frequently stereotyped than are female teachers. They are generally portrayed as effective teachers, but are seldom cast in heroic roles. Young female teachers often supply romantic interest in fictional prairie communities--either as heroines or "sirers". Aging spinsters are commonly found as minor figures in fiction, but in several cases the psychological problems of the teacher struggling against the encroachments of the old-maid stereotype are of major significance in prairie novels.

Teachers portrayed positively by novelists are typically warm, responsive people whose interest in their students extends beyond the classroom setting. Pupils' attitudes towards their teachers, as depicted in prairie fiction, are generally related to the teachers' respect for individuality, sense of justice, enthusiasm, and willingness to relate personally to students. Negatively portrayed teachers





commonly dislike children, lack interest in teaching, possess inadequate knowledge, are inflexible, or have an inflated opinion of their own importance.

In novels that have a youthful protagonist, teachers frequently play the role of mentor. The mentor often provides an example of cultural attainment and stimulates the young person in a disadvantaged environment to seek a better life, usually through continuing his education. While the mentor is usually sincere, he is not always successful. In a number of novels, prairie children choose non-teachers as mentors, sometimes because they find teachers unsuitable or unsympathetic.

Teachers are frequently depicted as outsiders in the community in which they teach, although they are considered very much within the normative jurisdiction of the community. The respect they command depends not only on their own personal attributes and professional attainments, but also on the type of community in which they work.

The lack of status of teachers as revealed in prairie fiction appears to be attributable to a number of factors: the vast range in qualifications and ability of those who have filled the teacher's role; the fact that teachers, particularly in the past, seldom regarded teaching as a permanent occupation; the almost complete dominance which the community exerted over the teacher's private as well as professional life. There is some evidence in recent novels, however, that all of these factors are presently undergoing changes.



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## CHAPTER I

### THE TEACHER IN LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

The value of literature, particularly fiction, as source material for study in the social sciences is becoming increasingly well-established. Dorothy Deegan, whose study, The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels, won a national research award, stated:

Nowhere can social attitude be more easily recognized than in fiction; nowhere is the slow and subtle change in attitudes more easily observed. Fiction is one of the best sources of social data, being impersonal and detached from actual life, yet deeply personal in its connotative and empathizing qualities.<sup>1</sup>

Such well-known sociologists as Willard Waller<sup>2</sup> and David Riesman<sup>3</sup> have made use of literary materials and techniques for the study and explanation of sociological principles and phenomena. Lewis A. Coser in his introduction to Sociology Through Literature has also advocated the increased use of literature in the social sciences:

Literature, though it may also be many other things, is social evidence and testimony . . . . Sociologists

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<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Yost Deegan, The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels. (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Willard Waller, The Sociology of Teaching (3rd. ed., New York: Russell & Russell, 1961.)

<sup>3</sup>David Riesman, Reuel Denney, and Nathan Glazer, The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1950).



have but rarely utilized works of literature in their investigations. And yet it would appear obvious that the trained sensibilities of a novelist or a poet may provide a richer source of social insight than, say, the impressions of untrained informants on which so much sociological research currently rests. There is an intensity of perception in the first-rate novelist when he describes a locale, a sequence of action, or a clash of characters, which can hardly be matched by those observers on whom sociologists are usually wont to rely . . . . Why then should not sociology harness to its use, for the understanding of man and his society, those untapped sources in the rich accumulation of literature?<sup>4</sup>

Edmund J. Farrell has suggested that education, too, can profitably make use of literature as source material for studying the educational process. In attempting to define the characteristics of good teachers, he found that "the cold criteria" which appear in educational sociology and psychology textbooks have little value because they lack contexts, and that observations of live teachers interacting with live students in valid contexts are impossible.<sup>5</sup> The investigator studying literary material, however, can be an unobtrusive observer of human relationships and can perceive inner motives which a subject would never make manifest to an interviewer. Farrell apparently agrees with Waller that literature as a source of social data is of considerable value "where fidelity to the inwardness of social behavior is desired."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Lewis A. Coser (ed.), Sociology Through Literature: An Introductory Reader (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 2-3.

<sup>5</sup>Edmund J. Farrell, "Toward the Definition of a Great Teacher," Phi Delta Kappan, XLV (June, 1964), 453-54.

<sup>6</sup>Waller, The Sociology of Teaching, p. 2.





Perhaps it is because of this advantage that literary material has been used so frequently in recent years to study the image of various professional and occupational groups. In the past few years, for example, the images of priests<sup>7, 8</sup>, professors<sup>9, 10</sup>, physicians<sup>11, 12</sup>, and psychiatrists<sup>13</sup> have been examined. A review of the research related to the study of teachers in literature reveals that a significant number of studies have been done based on American literature, but Canadian literature has remained a relatively untapped source.

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<sup>7</sup>Lawrence S. Cunningham, "The Image of the Priest in Contemporary Anglo-American Fiction" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Florida State University, 1969).

<sup>8</sup>Hugh D. Rank, "The Image of the Priest in American Catholic Fiction, 1945-65" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1969).

<sup>9</sup>Donald W. Click, "The Image of Higher Education in American Novels, 1920-1966" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Southern California, 1970).

<sup>10</sup>Michael V. Belok, "The College Professor in the Novel, 1940-1957" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Southern California, 1958).

<sup>11</sup>W. M. Marchand, "The Changing Role of the Medical Doctor in Selected Plays in American Drama" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1966).

<sup>12</sup>Carolyn B. Norris, "The Image of the Physician in Modern American Literature" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Maryland, 1969).

<sup>13</sup>Herbert J. Guthmann, "The Characterization of the Psychiatrist in American Fiction, 1859-1965" (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Southern California, 1969).





The first thesis dealing with the teacher in American literature was completed by Fanny Ames in 1930.<sup>14</sup> She concluded that in American fiction the teacher or school is usually incidental to the plot, being merely a part of the community life depicted. Teachers are usually secondary characters who shed light on more important characters or influence them in the roles they play. Except for sweet and attractive young women who are usually rescued from teaching by marriage, teachers are generally pictured in unsympathetic terms. They are frequently portrayed as being set apart from the community, in the community but not of it, a prey for gossip and criticism, living in fear of supervisors and principals.

Arthur Foff, in 1953, examined the stereotype of the teacher in sixty-two American novels and concluded that the stereotype portrayed by American novelists is of a depersonalized, desexualized, second-class citizen, who enjoys marginal acceptance only in the school. When a teacher is presented as a success in the classroom it is because he has an ability to understand his students.<sup>15</sup> Don Charles also found that teachers are usually presented as rather unflattering stereotypes. He states, "The teacher is rarely presented as a warm and sympathetic human being, and even more

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<sup>14</sup>Fanny O. Ames, "The Teacher in American Literature," (unpublished Master's thesis, Stanford University, 1930).

<sup>15</sup>Arthur Foff, "Teacher Stereotypes in the American Novel," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Stanford University, 1953).



seldom as the member of an honorable or respected profession."<sup>16</sup>

Frances Briggs, who traced the changing image of public school teachers in American novels from 1900 to 1960, found five distinct and different composite images, one for each period of time represented in the study. A composite self-image derived from nine autobiographies complemented and confirmed the novelists' conception of the teacher. Significant findings were the following: the teacher is coming to recognize and accept a more complex role; teaching is coming to be recognized as a profession in the social sciences; teachers in small communities are more subject to community expectations than are urban teachers but not as much so as thirty years ago; a good teacher earns status in the community; and most teachers persist in teaching for teaching's sake.<sup>17</sup>

Clarence Johnson's study is similar to that of Briggs, in that he also examined the changing concept of the teacher as portrayed in the American novel.<sup>18</sup> He found that from 1800 to World War I most novelists were critical of teachers and saw teaching as an

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<sup>16</sup>Don C. Charles, "The Stereotype of the Teacher in American Literature," Educational Forum, XIV (March, 1950), 299.

<sup>17</sup>Frances M. Briggs, "The Changing Concept of the Public School Teacher as Portrayed in American Novels: 1900-1960," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1962).

<sup>18</sup>Clarence S. Johnson, "The Teacher in the American Novel, 1900-1950: A Study of the Teacher as Seen by the Novelist," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Rutgers - the State University, 1966).



unrewarding profession. Teachers were generally pictured as tyrannic schoolmasters or embittered spinsters. In the period between the World Wars novelists recognized the efforts of some teachers to improve their profession and communities, but were critical of educational opportunists. During this period the teacher was often pictured as a compassionate counselor. From World War II to 1950 novelists made a sharp distinction between "good" and "poor" teachers and stressed the social pressures, economic neglect, educational mismanagement and community apathy which created "poor" teachers. While Johnson's study stops at 1950, Robert Bhaerman's indicates that more recent American novels have become very critical of teachers and education.<sup>19</sup> Bhaerman found that approximately seventy-eight percent of attitudinal statements about education in ninety-two contemporary American novels were unfavorable.

Two recent studies have considered more specialized aspects of the teacher's role. Ann Trabue, who analyzed the guidance procedures reflected in popular American fiction, saw fictional teacher-counselors giving increased emphasis to socially approved goals, working toward student self-expression, and conforming to the emphases of professional guidance writers.<sup>20</sup> Robert Hendon

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<sup>19</sup> Robert D. Bhaerman, "Darkened Image of Educators in Modern Fiction," Educational Forum, XXX (March, 1966), 341-47.

<sup>20</sup> Ann McDowell Trabue, "An Analysis of Guidance Procedure Reflected in Student-Teacher Relationships Portrayed in Selected Popular Fiction," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1962).





examined the existential awareness of selected teachers in recent American fiction. He found that in general these teachers did not evidence existential awareness and an acceptance of the responsibilities of human freedom, nor did they make these concepts central to their teaching. He concluded that they thus did not fulfill the greater responsibilities of the profession as seen by major American writers.<sup>21</sup>

Two investigators have analyzed the portrayal of the teacher in American drama. Andrew Erskine compared characteristics of dramatic portrayals of teachers with characteristics of actual teachers as reported by educational researchers.<sup>22</sup> He states that researchers and dramatists agree that teachers have an above average tendency to be neurotic and dominant. Dramatists, however, over-emphasize maladjustment among teachers, and though researchers have found teachers to be self-sufficient, this admirable trait is seldom shown by dramatists. Although Erskine decries the fact that dramatists frequently depict maladjusted teachers, he fails to keep in mind that conflict is essential in drama, and that plays, therefore, are seldom written about well-adjusted people. Erskine's study also reveals that in drama female teachers are never glamorous, and males are seldom heroic. Over half of the teachers

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<sup>21</sup>Robert P. Hendon, "An Existential Portrait of the Teacher in Recent American Literature," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1967).

<sup>22</sup>Andrew H. Erskine, "The Teacher in the Drama: An Analysis and Evaluation of the Characterization of American Teachers in Broadway Productions, 1920-1950," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, New York University, 1951).



are portrayed sympathetically, but most are pitied rather than admired. Erskine sees the teacher's image in drama as improving over the years, but feels that there is still considerable room for improvement.

A more recent study by Porter J. Crow confirms that the image of the teacher as portrayed in American drama has improved.<sup>23</sup> He reports that prior to 1916 teachers were represented by a narrow range of stereotypes, were used merely as dramatic devices or vehicles of plot, and were usually very superficially characterized. From 1916 to 1930 the teacher was characterized more fully, although he was still shown as a person of little insight as far as the teaching process was concerned. Crow feels that the writers of this period reflected little awareness of teaching methods, the profession, or the schools. During the 1930's teachers began to be recognized on the stage both as human beings and as teachers with increasing perceptiveness into the nature of teaching, the processes of learning, and the forces of life.

The most favorable teacher-images, however, were found by studies which examined portrayals of the teacher in juvenile fiction and the short story. Melva G. Kauffman found that authors of juvenile fiction tend to portray the teacher as admirable or respected for one quality or another, and that in this type of fiction reason and reasonableness dominate relations among teachers

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<sup>23</sup>Porter J. Crow, "The Teacher as a Character in American Drama," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, North Texas State University, 1963).





and pupils.<sup>24</sup> Albert Nissman, who studied the image of the teacher in selected American short stories published between 1900-1964, found the teacher-image was a rather satisfactory one, heavily weighted toward the admirable, and not stereotyped as much as he had expected. While the personal life of the teacher was not particularly good, teaching performance as portrayed in the short story was quite favorable.<sup>25</sup>

The only major study of the teacher in Canadian literature which has been completed to the present time is that of Ralph Hims1.<sup>26</sup> Hims1's thesis is broad in scope. It deals with novels, short stories, essays, satires, biographies, and autobiographies from across Canada, with no time delimitation. Because of the large scope of his study Hims1 made no attempt to be exhaustive, and he offers no explanation of his basis for selecting the literary works which he examined except to say that he was "required to rely on trial and error in the location of relevant selections."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Melva G. Kauffman, "An Analysis of the Teacher as Portrayed in Modern Juvenile Fiction," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Columbia University, 1962).

<sup>25</sup>Albert Nissman, "An Investigation into the Image of the Teacher as Reflected in Selected American Short Stories Published Between 1900-1964," (unpublished Doctor's dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1965).

<sup>26</sup>Ralph E. Hims1, "The Teacher in a Canadian Setting Revealed by a Study of the Literature of English Canada," (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1968).

<sup>27</sup>Hims1, p. 13.



On the basis of his examination of references to teachers in selected Canadian literary works, Hims1 states that Canadian authors portray teachers as being authoritarian, slow to perceive the need for change, insensitive to the nature of the children with whom they work, and ineffectual in relating to society. Rural teachers are depicted as being bound by societal expectations in communities in which they have little influence or status; urban teachers are interpreted as being self-conscious, frustrated, envious of other professionals, and vulnerable to the malicious among their students.

Most of the investigations of the image of the teacher as portrayed in literature suggest that writers provide insights that are of considerable value to the educator. There are a number of reasons why it is enlightening for the teacher to view his image through eyes other than his own. If he is to fulfill his role effectively, the teacher must be aware of the role society ascribes to him. In general, social expectancies develop over a long period of time, and when a teacher fails to play the roles expected of him by his pupils, peers, superiors, and community, he may be faced with serious personal as well as pedagogical problems.<sup>28</sup> It is certainly not implied that the teacher allow himself to be molded by social expectations; however, the

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<sup>28</sup> An interesting example of the problems a teacher can encounter when he acts in opposition to the role ascribed to him is described dramatically in Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, Inherit the Wind (New York: Random House, 1955), a play based on the famous Scopes "Monkey Trial."



reformer as well as the conformer can go about his work more effectively if he knows what role society ascribes to him.

Just how important literature is in reflecting or influencing social attitudes is difficult to determine. Certainly there is little doubt that the novels of Charles Dickens had a profound effect on the educational reforms of his age.<sup>29</sup> The relationship between fiction and social attitudes is extremely complex in that while fiction may reflect the attitudes of a particular society, it may also have a subtle but pervasive effect in engendering, propagating, or altering social attitudes.<sup>30</sup> Margaret Mead suggests that the image most people have of teachers and schools is affected by the literature and tradition of the society.<sup>31</sup>

The image of the teacher in fiction may affect not only the attitude of society toward the teacher, it may also affect the teacher's own self-concept. Arthur Foff, who found that the teacher is often portrayed as a stereotype, stresses that stereotyping can affect all social interaction involving teachers and can, in fact, imprison the teacher within the stereotype to the extent

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<sup>29</sup> Philip Collins, Dickens and Education (London: Macmillan, 1965).

<sup>30</sup> That it is a widely held belief that literature can affect social attitude is evidenced by the tendency of totalitarian governments throughout the centuries to exercise political censureship.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Mead, The School in American Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 9.





that he becomes unused to freedom: "Thus stereotyping warps individuals, depriving them of a good measure of their creative productivity; and in so doing it robs society of many rich contributions which only accrue to a culture which takes a democratic and realistic cognizance of individual differences."<sup>32</sup>

Another possible value of a study of the teacher in fiction is that it may help to reveal the public image of the teacher and thus the status of the teaching profession. A number of writers have stressed that status is important to an occupational group not only because it is usually related to economic rewards, but also because it is a critical factor in attracting the most capable recruits to the profession.

The prestige accorded teaching, so the argument runs, determines the kind of person attracted to the occupation. Where the prestige and rewards of teaching are low, only those unable to compete for great success in the society will find teaching attractive, but where the prestige is high, the services of many kinds of persons will be offered and the most competent chosen. Not only does occupational prestige determine the kind of person attracted to the occupation, but the kind of person seeking to enter the occupation determines, in its turn, the level of occupational prestige.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Foff, "Teacher Stereotypes in the American Novel," p. 5.

<sup>33</sup>W. W. Charters, Jr., "The Social Background of Teaching," Handbook of Research on Teaching, ed. N. L. Gage (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1963), p. 747.



Finally, a study of this type can show the profession wherein it meets or fails to meet the standards of the cultural pattern or demands of society. It may guide the profession in eradicating undesirable traits, and through tracing changes in attitudes toward the teaching profession may provide the profession with a measure of its success in its attempt to better its public image.

Although a study which uses fiction as a source of social data can have considerable significance, it also has certain important limitations. First, it is subjective in that it is the interpretation of one individual who perceives the works of literature from his own frame of reference. The quality of the interpretation is determined by the investigator's skill and perceptiveness as a literary critic. For example, the reader's ability to perceive the often subtle or ambiguous relationship between the author and the narrator is a crucial factor in understanding many works of fiction. Also, if the reader is not sensitive to a novelist's use of irony, he may often interpret a character or a situation in a way directly opposite to what the author intended.

Secondly, as Nissman points out, in an investigation of this kind one must keep in mind that the teacher-image in fiction does not necessarily reflect the true feelings of the author.<sup>34</sup> An author's purpose in creating a particular characterization of a

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<sup>34</sup>Albert Nissman, "The Short Story Writer: Conjurer of the Teacher-Image," Clearing House, XLII (March, 1968), 400.





teacher is dependent upon his larger design in the work of literature. "As a literary artist or even as a mere craftsman, he has the license to fashion, for purposes of dramatic effect, the kind of teacher-image that best illuminates his theme, best operates with plausibility in the plot, and offers the most vivid contrast to the other characters with whom the teacher-image interacts."<sup>35</sup>

A recognition of the writer's larger purpose can save the investigator from falling into the error of many of his predecessors who looked upon the novelist as a betrayer of the teaching profession for depicting teachers negatively. The dangers inherent in drawing conclusions about novelists' or society's attitudes toward teachers on the basis of a few selected novels are apparent. However, it is reasonable to assume that these dangers can be substantially reduced if one draws his conclusions from an examination of a comprehensive sample of the fiction of a region.

The present study of the image of the teacher in literature has been delimited to include an examination of teacher characterizations in full-length works of fiction published between 1921 and 1971 with a setting in the Canadian prairie provinces. The scope of the study was restricted in this manner in order that a reasonable attempt could be made to examine all books falling within the delimitations of the study.

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<sup>35</sup>Nissman, p. 402.



The novel was chosen as the literary genre most appropriate to this study for, as Henry James has stated, "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life."<sup>36</sup> Some of the characteristics of the novel form which make it particularly useful in an investigation of this kind are revealed in the following definition by Lionel Trilling, who describes the novel as "a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research being always manners as the indication of the direction of man's soul."<sup>37</sup> The novel form was chosen over short fiction, which has similar purposes in a more condensed form, because the novel permits fuller development of character, situation, and theme. Collections of short fiction have been included in the study only when the stories or sketches are closely related in terms of character, situation, and theme, so that the total collection provides opportunity for character development similar to that of the novel. Examples of this type of short fiction collection are Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches and W. O. Mitchell's Jake and the Kid. The stories in both collections concern significant episodes in the life of a child growing up on the prairie. Throughout this study, when the term

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<sup>36</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," The House of Fiction, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), p. 212.



"novel" is used, it is intended to include these single-author short-story collections.

A second delimitation of the study is that it includes only those novels which have a setting in the Canadian Prairie Provinces. The novels of the prairies are particularly appropriate for a study of this kind because, according to Desmond Pacey, they tend to be more realistic than novels written about other parts of Canada:

It is a strange fact that almost all of Canadian realistic fiction, until very recent years at any rate, has been set on the prairies. It was in novels of the prairies, such as those of Grove, Stead and Ostenso, that Canadian realism began, and to this day one can be fairly confident in predicting that a novel about Saskatchewan, say, will be more in touch with reality than a novel about Ontario.<sup>38</sup>

For purposes of this study the three prairie provinces have been considered to be a single, distinct region. The more populated areas of these three provinces, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, constitute one of the great geographic divisions of this country; however, for purposes of this study the term "prairie" is not restricted to its geographic sense. Rather, the term is used in the same sense in which Elder used it and for the same reasons:

When I speak of the prairies, I should explain, I am using the term loosely to include adjacent parkland and bush. However much the physical elements of this sprawling region may vary, the

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<sup>38</sup>Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1961), p. 223.





common themes in the novels about it remain essentially the same: the struggle with an adverse, if not hostile, nature; the narrowing effect of this struggle on characters remote from cultural streams, and from the remoteness and sheer space, the isolation and utter loneliness of the characters.<sup>39</sup>

The prairie provinces are alike in being populated by people of heterogeneous national origins and yet "there is a remarkable unity of spirit prevailing among prairie dwellers; and a way of life as distinctive as the region which fosters it."<sup>40</sup> In addition to all the other similarities, the three prairie provinces can be considered as a single, distinct region, for purposes of this study, because they have had a similar history of settlement and educational development.

A third major delimitation of the study is that it includes only those novels which were published between 1921 and 1971. This time restriction of a half-century was chosen somewhat arbitrarily in order to limit the fictional material to a manageable quantity; however, there are sound reasons, embedded in the literary history of Canada, for beginning a study of this kind in the decade of the twenties. Desmond Pacey states that after the First World War

. . . there is no doubt that the general air of change, excitement, and confidence did affect the development of Canadian literature . . . now there was a conscious, at times a self-conscious, determination to create a literature commensurate

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<sup>39</sup> A. T. Elder, "Some Marks of Regionalism in the Canadian Novels of the Prairies" (paper read at the Canadian Council of Teachers of English convention, August, 1968, Calgary, Alberta).

<sup>40</sup> Edward McCourt, The Canadian West in Fiction (rev. ed.; Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1970), preface.



with Canada's new status as an independent nation.<sup>41</sup>

This determination was illustrated by the establishment of four new magazines that have had an important influence on the development of Canadian literature: Canadian Bookman (1919), Canadian Forum (1920), Canadian Historical Review (1920), and Dalhousie Review (1921). In Canadian prairie fiction the 1920's are especially significant because it was during this decade, with the publication of Grove's Settlers of the Marsh (1925), Ostenso's Wild Geese (1925), and Stead's Grain (1926), that the realistic novel replaced the historical or regional romance as the predominant fiction form of Western Canada. In a study in which literature is used as a source of sociological data, the realistic novel has obvious advantages.

All novels published before 1921 or which have a fictional time setting prior to 1900 have been excluded. This restriction was made in order to obtain a larger proportion of novels which were contemporaneous with the lifetime of the author. Much of historical fiction is, of necessity, based on secondary sources. What is desired for purposes of this study, however, are first-hand accounts by novelists of a society which they themselves have experienced.

This study is also limited to works of fiction published in English. Books written in other languages but subsequently

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<sup>41</sup>Desmond Pacey, "The Writer and His Public, 1920-1960," The Literary History of Canada, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 478.



translated into English, however, have been included.

Fiction written primarily for juvenile readers has been excluded. A comparison of the image of the teacher found by Kauffman, who analyzed the portrayal of the teacher in juvenile fiction, with the image of the teacher found in studies dealing with adult literature seems to indicate that novelists may modify their depiction of teachers when they are writing specifically for children.<sup>42</sup>

The term "teacher" is used in this study to refer to both classroom teachers and principals teaching at the elementary or secondary school levels in public schools of the prairie provinces. It does not include university professors or public school administrators such as inspectors or superintendents. The principal has been included because in most works of prairie fiction the principal is also to a large extent a classroom teacher. Other administrators are referred to in the study, but usually only in regard to their relationship with classroom teachers.

Once the scope of the study was delimited to include an analysis of prairie novels set in the twentieth century, published since 1921, and containing references to school teachers, the next step was to prepare a comprehensive list of novels which fulfill these criteria. Since no up-to-date bibliography of prairie fiction exists--much less a bibliography of teachers in prairie

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<sup>42</sup>Kauffman, "An Analysis of the Teacher as Portrayed in Modern Juvenile Fiction."





fiction--this step, though preliminary to the study itself, was a major undertaking. An invaluable source for this bibliographical task was Bruce Peel's A Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces to 1953 and its supplement published in 1963 which amends errors and omissions but does not up-date the original work.<sup>43</sup> Of the 121 works of fiction listed in Peel's Bibliography, thirty-five contain references to teachers teaching in the prairie provinces during the present century.

For prairie fiction published since 1953, it was necessary to prepare a bibliography to up-date that of Peel. In order to do this, a list of all fiction referred to in University of Toronto Quarterly's annual review, "Letters in Canada," and in Canadian Literature's annual "Checklist of Canadian Literature" was compiled. To this list was added a number of titles gleaned from Canadiana, suggested by acquaintances, or located in various libraries and bookstores. Through consulting book reviews in journals or briefly examining the books themselves, the setting of each available book was determined. Of the several hundred books considered at this stage of the study, eighty-nine were found to be set at least partially in the prairie provinces.<sup>44</sup> Of these eighty-nine novels, thirty-five contain fictional portrayals of teachers. These thirty-five novels published since 1953 plus the thirty-five from Peel's

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<sup>43</sup> Bruce B. Peel, A Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces to 1953 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956).

<sup>44</sup> A compilation of prairie fiction published since 1953 is included in Appendix A.



bibliography which contain references to teachers constitute the primary material of this investigation. The seventy novels contain references to 143 fictional teachers.

In considering possible methods of analysis of the teacher-image in this rather large volume of literary material, the advice of others who have completed similar studies was taken into consideration. Dorothy Deegan suggests that "any objective classification of a subjective material such as fiction must in itself remain somewhat subjective. The ideal way to get at such subtleties as attitude, for example, is by direct quotation."<sup>45</sup> Albert Nissman, in justifying the approach he adopted in his investigation, states: "Of course, it was realized that the analysis of literature must be subjective and interpretative, and that statistical analyses, although valuable in other contexts, would tend to destroy the subjective impressions that are germane to fiction."<sup>46</sup>

The analysis of the fictional portrayals in the present study is admittedly subjective. However, in order to preserve the integrity of the authors' portrayals and to allow the reader to compare his own impressions with those of the investigator, direct quotations from the novels have been liberally used in the chapters that follow.

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<sup>45</sup>Deegan, The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels, p. 37.

<sup>46</sup>Nissman, "An Investigation of the Image of the Teacher as Reflected in Selected American Short Stories Published Between 1900-1964," p. 57.



Chapter II provides an overview of the role of the teacher in the prairie novel. It is designed to introduce the reader to the major teacher characters and to the parts they play in the novels. The chapter is organized, in general, around the personal life of the teachers, with an emphasis on their inter-personal relationships, physical characteristics, and personality traits.

Chapter III consists of an analysis of the fictional teachers in their professional roles. More specifically, aspects such as the following have been considered: academic background and teaching experience, perception of teacher's role, philosophy of education, motivation towards teaching, goals and aspirations, relationship with students, parents, and colleagues, quality of discipline, and effectiveness of teaching methods.

Chapter IV deals with the teacher as mentor--a significant theme in prairie fiction. In a number of novels of this region the protagonist is a young person attempting to come to grips with his culture, his environment, and the problems of growing up. In novels of this nature a teacher often plays a part, even though the protagonist may not be his student. The type, the extent, and the effect of the teacher's influence in these predominantly guidance situations are considered.

Chapter V contains an analysis of the teacher in the community with an emphasis on the quality of teacher-community relationships and reasons for acceptance or rejection of the teacher as a community member. In this chapter such factors as the teacher's length of tenure and his status and influence in the community are





also examined.

The final chapter is comprised of a summary of findings and conclusions regarding the image of the teacher in Canadian prairie fiction. It provides an overview of trends in the way teachers have been depicted in novels of the past five decades, and explores whether the fictional portrayals of teachers differ from the norm when the authors are or have been teachers.



## CHAPTER II

### THE PERSONAL LIFE OF THE TEACHER

Although the statement "No prairie novel worth its salt is without a dramatic scene in the district school"<sup>1</sup> is somewhat of an exaggeration, it is true, nevertheless, that the teacher is a frequently occurring figure in the fiction of the Canadian prairie provinces. Typically, the personal life of most teachers in prairie fiction receives considerably more attention than their professional life. For instance, attractive young female teachers are often introduced primarily to supply romantic interest. As Elder points out, "This is a function that teachers, as fresh faces in a community, fulfill all too readily for the novelist in search of a plot."<sup>2</sup> That fresh female faces other than teachers were rare in prairie communities is evidenced in Harold Baldwin's Pelicans in the Sky. In Baldwin's novel an attractive stranger in the prairie town is immediately mistaken to be a teacher from one of the neighboring districts.

Christine, the young teacher in Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches, recognizes that her presence as a newcomer fulfills a need of the community. She says, "Somehow I furnished it with a touch of that

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<sup>1</sup>A. T. Elder, "Some Marks of Regionalism in the Canadian Novels of the Prairies" (paper read at the Canadian Council of Teachers of English convention, August, 1966, Calgary, Alberta), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Elder, pp. 6-7.



novelty which it loved above everything in the world" (p. 156). This need for a spark of novelty amid the socially uneventful life of a pioneer farming community perhaps accounts for the Western Canadian's preference in teachers observed by Frederick Philip Grove in Fruits of the Earth. According to Grove, "Westerners hold experience and expertness in small esteem; they prefer the young girl who will dance and gad about" (p. 57).

In novels depicting life in the pre-depression era in particular, girls are portrayed as coming West where men are plentiful to teach for a year or two in order to find a husband. For example, Miss Piggott in McCourt's Music at the Close "had grown up in a small Maritimes community where the stigma of old maid inexorably attached itself to every female over the age of thirty. When she was twenty-nine Miss Piggott migrated west, where, according to popular legend, men outnumbered women ten to one. But she had failed to land any one of the ten allotted to her by popular statistics, and had long since given up trying" (p. 26).

Arthur Storey, in Prairie Harvest, paints a bleak picture, unrelieved by the touch of humour in McCourt's portrayal, of the young women teachers in a rural Saskatchewan school district who were more dedicated to finding a husband than to teaching children.

Miss Mill was far from being an inspiration to the children. Like most of the young women who came to teach at Melness during and after the war, she had no real interest in the boys and girls or in education. Her teaching license she regarded merely as an admission ticket to a community in which there might be an eligible male. When she found one she married and left the school. Had she not found one within the year, she would have moved on to another school





to continue her quest. So it was with Miss Crabb and Miss McIntosh and others who followed her in quick succession. (p. 104)

In fairness to the teachers, however, it should be noted that even those who were not consciously husband-hunting were presumed to be doing so by the local community. Ruth Elder, in Ethel Kirk Grayson's Willow Smoke, maintains "with nun-like conviction" that she never intends to marry, but her landlady teases her that the single-life of a prairie school-teacher is only three years (p. 109). Emma Anderson, in Evans' All in a Twilight, who comes West to teach before the turn of the century with the intention of approaching "the great business of teaching seriously as a life profession" (p. 4), is confronted by the same community expectation. The first time she goes to the post office the postmaster's wife observes, "Well, I s'pose you're another come to get your man!" (p. 4)

Christine, the young teacher in Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches, on her first Sunday in the village is surprised to find that a large group of young men have gathered in front of her landlady's house. Some of them apparently have come from fairly distant villages. She has no idea that they have come as suitors until after they leave and her landlady chides her for not having paid any attention to them. "It gets around quickly in these parts . . . when a new schoolteacher comes to town, but I'm afraid that your distant manner has put your boy friends off for a long time" (p. 155).

Because each new teacher coming into the community is thought of as a potential embodiment of romance, it is perhaps natural that in novels of the pioneer and settlement periods on the prairie the



teacher is often portrayed primarily as a romantic heroine and only incidentally as a teacher. Such is the case in David Howarth's The Valley of Gold, published in 1921 and set in the Qu'Appelle Valley around the turn of the century. This novel employs many of the nineteenth-century melodrama conventions, including a diabolic villain kidnapping the traditionally beautiful heroine, Mary McClure. He is foiled, however, by the sterling hero, Ned Pullar, who performs a daring rescue in the face of great peril. The villain meets his nemesis, and his cohort, the heroine's father, undergoes a sudden conversion from evil and is joyfully forgiven by the reunited young couple. In novels of this type, the most apparent reason for the heroine being a teacher is often merely that it gives the novelist a plausible reason for her being in the community in the first place. In this particular novel, Mary McClure is a local girl who has been away at university. However, when she falls in love with the hero during her summer holidays, she decides to obtain a teaching permit so that she can teach in the country school near his home. Needless to say, being cast from the flawless heroine mold, she is an ideal teacher.

The idealized teacher-heroine is not uncommon in prairie fiction, perhaps partly because so many of our female writers were themselves schoolteachers. Nellie McClung (Purple Springs), Martha Ostenso (Wild Geese), Vera Lysenko (Westerly Wild), Barbara Villy Cormack (The House), and Gabrielle Roy (Where Nests the Water Hen and Street of Riches) are examples of authors with teaching experience who have created attractive young teachers to play major roles in their



novels. In the fiction of all of these novelists the teaching of the beautiful heroine is exemplary, but in works other than those of Gabrielle Roy the teaching role is subordinate to that of romantic heroine.

The young schoolmistresses created by these teacher-authors have much in common. They are all models of beauty, enthusiasm, dedication, and cultural attainment. The chic and sprightly Mademoiselle Côté, in Gabrielle Roy's Where Nests the Water Hen, for example, is a picture of elegance and refinement when she arrives in the little one-family community in Northern Manitoba. Luzina, the matriarch, views her as "a slender, sensitive apparition such as no one had ever hoped to behold upon the island in the Little Water Hen" (p. 46). Gordon Roper, in the introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of the novel, states: "In the charming Mademoiselle Côté on her first teaching mission there must be something of Gabrielle Roy herself" (p. vii).

Similarly, there is obviously much of Nellie McClung in Pearl Watson, the heroine of Purple Springs. This is the same Pearlie, grown older, that Mrs. McClung wrote about in Sowing Seeds in Danny (1908) and The Second Chance (1910). Pearl now has grown into a beautiful, forthright young woman just returned from Normal School. She has retained the fierce family loyalty, respect for hard work, zest for life, and love of the prairies portrayed in the earlier books; but she has gained a sense of social commitment and an interest in women's rights and provincial politics. In Professor McCourt's opinion "the young lady schoolma'am is a much less attractive and





much less alive character than the engaging little gamin with the great heart and romantic outlook who is the heroine of Sowing Seeds in Danny. The grown-up Pearl is so imbued with crusading zeal on behalf of various causes that she develops into a rather tiresome and unconvincing reformer."<sup>3</sup>

In Purple Springs, Pearl is depicted as a physically attractive girl in the most wholesome sort of way -- at one point she is even described as looking "like a red apple in her wholesomeness" (p. 50). To her former teacher, Mr. Donald, "Pearl looked like a rose, too, a rose of his own growing" (p. 91). The ex-premier's maid says, after seeing Pearl for the first time, "She had eyes like a fairy princess, lips like cherries, and the nicest clothes, but you could tell she wasn't thinkin' about them. I just wanted her to stay and talk to me" (p. 301).

Pearl's quality of impelling people to listen to her is predominant throughout the novel. The local M.L.A. labels her "a fire-brand, an incendiary" (p. 106), as she fights for women's rights, female suffrage, and temperance. Among other accomplishments, Pearl saves a woman's home, reunites a family, reduces bigotry in the community, and topples a firmly entrenched provincial government. This latter achievement, which was accomplished primarily through parodying the premier in a political satire entitled "The Women's Parliament," seems too improbable for fiction. It is, however, based

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<sup>3</sup>Edward A. McCourt, The Canadian West in Fiction (rev. ed.; Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1970), pp. 86-87.



on an experience in Mrs. McClung's own life, as described in an entertaining and well-documented account in her second autobiography, The Stream Runs Fast.

Mrs. McClung typically employed her novels as agents of social reform. In Purple Springs this inclination is particularly apparent. Even the rather conventional love story which threads through the novel is subordinate to Pearl's activities as a reformer, although it forms something of a framework for the book. The romance between Pearl and Dr. Clay, who is ten years her senior, began when Pearl was fifteen, three years prior to the opening of the novel. Because of Pearl's youth they agree not to speak of their love until her eighteenth birthday--the day Pearl is looking forward to as the novel opens. The day before her birthday, however, Dr. Clay learns that he has a serious illness which may curtail his activities and shorten his life. He unselfishly refuses to allow his misfortune to be a blight on Pearl's promising future and keeps his illness a secret from her. Though he attempts to cut himself off from Pearl's love without telling her why, in contradiction to his doctor's orders he continues to work for the causes that are dear to her. As anyone familiar with Mrs. McClung's romances would expect, Dr. Clay thrives by working for noble causes. He regains his health, and the proposal of marriage which Pearl anticipated in the first few pages of the novel is finally issued as the novel draws to a conventional romantic conclusion.

Like Gabrielle Roy and Nellie McClung, Martha Ostenso in Wild Geese writes about an area in which she herself has taught as a



rural schoolteacher. Wild Geese provides an interesting example of how the typical role of the prairie teacher--that of an outsider observing the community she serves--can provide a congenial point of view for a teacher-author. Miss Ostenso makes use of the point of view of the twenty-year-old schoolteacher, Lind Archer, to present her readers with a first-hand account of the tyrannizing of Caleb Gare over his family. The common practice of teachers boarding at the home of one of their students gives Lind Archer a chance which no other member of the community has of viewing the strange sociological and psychological phenomenon of the Gare family's day to day life. The novel is not a first person narrative, but it is written usually, though not consistently, from the teacher's point of view.

Lind, however, is more than an observer of an unfolding family drama. She plays an influential, though discreet, part in breaking Caleb's ruthless hold over his family; she provides a link between the Gare family and the rest of the community; and she is the romantic heroine in the closely interrelated subplot involving her developing romance with Mrs. Gare's illegitimate son, Mark Jordan. Although the scenes between these two rather conventionally attractive lovers at times seem rather insipid, they do provide idyllic interludes which through vivid contrast serve to heighten the tension in the vital, dramatic, down-to-earth scenes involving the Gare family.

Helen Bendle, in Barbara Villy Cormack's The House, is another example of a teacher as romantic heroine. Like Mademoiselle Côté, Pearl Watson, and Lind Archer, she is beautiful and talented. The





daughter of a university professor, she "had topped her grades regularly, won singing awards at musical festivals, and had been elected to the top student offices in High School and Normal" (p. 130). The author leaves no doubt that she is physically attractive. When she first arrives in Sunrise School District in Alberta during the 1930's, she is seen by ten-year-old Philip Townsend as "a slicked-up, citified stranger with red hair blowing all round her face, and a big grin that seemed especially for him" (p. 122). A thresherman jokes, "Quite a babe. Think I'll start back to school again" (p. 124). Later, as a guest soloist at a symphony concert in the city, Helen is seen in more ethereal terms through the eyes of Bob Jackson, the man she eventually marries. "Then suddenly from the wings she came, her red-gold hair blazing, her dress a diaphonous mist of green, she herself radiant, young, and unbelievably lovely. . . . God, she was beautiful, with that funny little shy smile, and the carriage and walk of an angel" (p. 188).

Despite her artistic successes in the city, Helen can not forget the rural district in which she taught and the young English farmer she met there. Like Lind Archer in Wild Geese and Pearl Watson in Purple Springs, Helen Bendle is successful in overcoming the difficulties and misunderstandings that traditionally complicate the love life of a romantic heroine. All three novels end conventionally, with Lind promising to marry her architect-turned-farmer, Pearl promising to marry her doctor-turned-politician, and Helen marrying her farmer-turned-garage-owner.

Not so fortunate is Julie Lacoste in Westerly Wild, another



novel written by a former teacher, Vera Lysenko. Julie Lacoste, like Helen Bendle in Cormack's The House, is red-haired, high-spirited, and extremely attractive. Like Helen she is a well-dressed city girl who seems somewhat out of place in a rural school during the depression. In Westerly Wild, Vera Lysenko makes perhaps the fullest attempt of any novelist to tell the story of the prairie schoolteacher during the depression era. However, her heroine, Julie Lacoste, is far from typical. Compared to Julie, the former three teachers at Prairie Dawn had been "a rather undernourished and shabby lot" (p. 32). Thus they were probably more representative of teachers living under depression conditions than is the beautiful and sophisticated Julie Lacoste. Julie chooses to teach in the "Dust Bowl" of Saskatchewan for thirty-five dollars a month, rather than go to Europe to study art, because she feels her talents can brighten the lives of children growing up in this bleak environment.

While Julie Lacoste is pictured as an extremely talented and dedicated teacher, her personal life affects her professional role to the extent that she leaves the district before the school year is quite over. From the time she first comes to the arid community, ironically named Fair Prospect, Julie feels a kinship for the prairie wind, which is looked upon by local people as a destructive force in the depression-ridden land. The wind becomes symbolic of the passionate spirit within Julie and, to a larger extent, within Marcus Haugen, the man with whom she falls in love. Haugen is a stormy-hearted Byronic hero--an exile in the community in which he lives, defiant of its values.



Haugen acknowledges a spiritual kinship with Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, but he is more clearly a descendent of another fiercely passionate literary exile, Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, who had a similar attraction for a young instructress. Haugen thunders across the prairie on his black stallion in the face of the prairie winds, just as Rochester thundered across the moors through the wind and rain. And they both share the same secret which shuts them off in the eyes of society from the women they love--a mad wife shut up in one room of an imposing house. Like Jane Eyre, when Julie Lacoste learns of her lover's terrible secret, she makes the soul-rending decision to tear herself away from him. However, there is no redemptive fire for Haugen as there is for Rochester. The lovers are not reunited. Rather, in a dramatic climax which brings together the symbols of his spirit and pride--the prairie wind and the horse, Marcus Haugen dies violently, impaled on a barb-wire fence.

Attractive, red-haired teacher-heroines appear to be popular with prairie novelists. In addition to Helen Bendle and Julie Lacoste, there is Moira Glenn, who comes to teach at Pine Creek School during the 1920's, in Edward McCourt's realistic novel, Music at the Close. The beautiful young teacher immediately attracts many admirers, including Neil Frazer, the protagonist of the story, and his best friend Gil Reardon. Neil is a romantic dreamer; Gil a man of action. In order to make himself worthy of his idol, Neil embarks on an ambitious plan to finish high school so that he can go on to university. While he is accomplishing this, and weaving romantic fantasies centering on Moira, she leaves the district with Gil Reardon. Years



later she explains, "Neil, a woman likes to be put on a pedestal. But she doesn't want to stay there. Gil knew that. But apparently you didn't" (p. 167).

When Neil and Gil meet again, shortly before Gil is killed attempting to organize the Saskatchewan coal miners in a strike during the depression, Gil tells Neil about the elopement and marriage. "Moira was true to her upbringing. We made everything all nice and respectable the week after we left. But marriage didn't work out for either of us" (p. 155). After Gil's death Neil goes to the country school "somewhere in the North" where the widowed Moira is teaching. Shortly thereafter they are married and on Moira's insistence return to the farm at Pine Creek. Because Neil, the dreamer, hates farming, Moira has to hold things together during the depression until he is rescued from farming by the Second World War, and from the fate of being less than an ordinary mortal, in the eyes of his son, by death in action.

While Neil is in military service, Moira teaches part-time in Edmonton. Thus her teaching career, though sporadic, covers three periods of prairie history--in Pine Creek during the 1920's as a single girl, in Golden Vale during the depression while separated from her first husband and later as his widow, and in Edmonton during the war years as a soldier's wife. At no time, however, throughout the entire course of the novel, is she seen in the role of a classroom teacher.

A teacher who is of interest because of both her personal and professional attributes is Ruth Thompson in W. O. Mitchell's well-





known novel, Who Has Seen the Wind. Miss Thompson differs from all the previously mentioned romantic heroines other than Julie Lacoste of Westerly Wind in that she is introduced into the novel as an experienced teacher. Mademoiselle Côté (Where Nests the Water Hen), Christine (Street of Riches), Pearl Watson (Purple Springs), Lind Archer (Wild Geese), and Helen Bendle (The House) are all portrayed in their first teaching assignment. Miss Thompson, on the other hand, at the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven has had eight years of teaching experience when she arrives in the southern Saskatchewan town depicted in Mitchell's novel of the depression.

Miss Thompson, with her expressive brown eyes and her "bluing-black hair, cut short," (p. 131) is an attractive, but very independent and liberated young woman. She prefers to roll her own cigarettes, and claims that she can also drive a binder and break a horse. Her principal, James Digby, responds, "That's nice . . . . You can teach too" (p. 146). Miss Thompson takes a personal interest in the lives of her students, particularly the social outcasts such as the son of the town drunk and the motherless children of the Chinese cafe owner. It is characteristic of Miss Thompson that she misses a paper on "Democracy," delivered at the local P.T.A. meeting, in order to go to Mi Tang's birthday party, after she learns that the daughters of the P.T.A. members are going to boycott it out of prejudice and cruelty. On the way to the party she is greeted by a number of people. "She nodded to them all with a quiet friendliness that contradicted her state of mind and showed no distinction between parent, child, and town drunk" (p. 161).



Because of her willingness to work against social injustice, Ruth Thompson can be likened to Pearl Watson in Purple Springs. However, she is far less optimistic than Nellie McClung's heroine that "sweetness and light" can easily prevail over the evil in mankind. Certainly she does not have Pearl's faith in her own persuasive powers. In fact she experiences a sense of futility in her fight against the community's bigotry toward the starving Chinese family.

She could speak to Mrs. Abercrombie at the Parent-Teachers meeting, but no doubt the woman's response would be unfortunate. She was too much like her daughter; listening to Mrs. Bowdage's paper, she would have Mariel's same slightly stunned look of inattention--hers, to Democracy; Mariel's, to the decimal point. It would do no good--speaking to all the mothers would do no good; the thing was too terribly involved. (p. 159)

Miss Thompson and Mr. Digby, the school principal, agree to share the Chinese family's grocery bill. At the end of the month, however, they find that Dr. Peter Svarich, to whom Miss Thompson had been engaged five years ago in another town, has already paid it.

A second engagement to Peter Svarich also fails, partly because of her insistence on personal independence in the face of Svarich's possessiveness. One night, for instance, she angers him by resisting his attempts to get her to tell him what she is thinking. She maintains, "You know--I'm an individual too, I'm not you, Peter. I'm another person with feelings and wants and thoughts. You can't have all of me" (p. 257). What probably drew Miss Thompson to Peter Svarich in the first place is her strong maternal instinct. She discovers this aspect of her relationship with Svarich only after Digby surprises her with a marriage proposal which she refuses. She



is deeply concerned about hurting Digby by her rejection, "yet she could not think of Digby as 'poor Jim.' Somehow a person did not think of the Principal with commiseration, not as with Peter. Digby could take care of himself. Peter needed her. That may have tipped the scales. Peter needed her" (p. 216).

However, "the course of love was again not running smoothly for Peter Svarich and Miss Thompson" (p. 256). They become engaged again but the wedding is postponed several times. Each time Ruth seems to drift closer to Digby, although she is too soft-hearted to hurt Peter a second time by calling off the marriage completely. Doctor Svarich, himself, while driving Miss Thompson to a school board meeting, breaks the engagement. "Both times--a mistake. More mine than yours. I knew. You--you're blinded by an overdeveloped maternal instinct. I advise children--lots of them--your own. . . . And Digby's" (p. 282).

She has a chance to use her maternal instinct in Digby's behalf at the meeting, when the schoolboard, led by the behemoth Mrs. Abercrombie, attempts to force the Principal either to have the Young Ben sent to reform school or to resign. Miss Thompson fires a fusilade in her campaign against bigotry by confronting the board members with their own individual sins or hypocrisies. She then resigns. Mrs. Abercrombie is aghast at the effrontery, but the other board members turn against her, accepting her carelessly insinuated threat to resign from the board and moving a vote of confidence in Mr. Digby and Miss Thompson.

The reader is left with the impression that Miss Thompson,





like the vast majority of fictional teacher-heroines and Mounted Policemen in the Canadian West, will get her man. Not all fictional female teachers, however, are romantic heroines, and when they are not, they do not fare so well romantically. In the novels considered thus far, the teacher has almost invariably been sought after by a number of eligible men. In other novels, in which a young woman other than the teacher is the romantic heroine, the teacher, as a well-dressed, attractive stranger in the community, may pose a threat to the heroine. It is no doubt an overstatement to say that "the teacher as siren" has been an important theme in Canadian prairie fiction, but the role has been filled in a number of novels including W. A. S. Tegart's In the Face of the Winds, E. A. McCourt's Home is the Stranger, and Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many.

In the Face of the Winds, although not published until 1962, is set in the Saskatchewan prairies during the first decade of the twentieth century. Len Tasker, the rather shy protagonist, on first meeting Miss Opaly Grenn in the raucous household where she boards, is struck by the young teacher's beauty. "Here was one of the daintiest creatures he had ever seen. She was beautiful. Her golden hair was particularly noticeable. She wore a green-flowered silk housecoat, which made no attempt to hide the sensuous curves of her superb limbs" (p. 75). She is amused by Len's embarrassment when she invites him to come upstairs to her room. He declines, but later in the evening she has a chance to sit close beside him on the couch while having tea and sensuously presses her knee against his. On the way home



that night Len's mind is filled with "the lovely face of Miss Grenn, with her smooth white arms, her dainty hands, and that something in her eyes" (p. 83).

The heroine of this novel is Leith Faris, the high-minded young daughter of a local landowner. The teacher serves as a foil and as a rival in romance for the heroine. As might be expected, Opaly is somewhat less popular with the ladies than with the men of the community. Leith's mother, for example, claims that Len's attraction for Opaly will not last long. "Opaly is just a superficial beauty. She's had ten fellows in ten months" (p. 100). The suspicions of some of the women are borne out when Opaly disappears from the community and is reported to have been seen washing dishes in a Saskatoon restaurant. She returns to the district with a local cowboy, Fork O'Brien, a one-week-old marriage certificate, and a three-month-old baby. Fork resumes his job on the Faris farm, and Opaly gets a job there working as a cook and maid. Shortly after Opaly's marriage, Len Tasker begins to take an interest in the new teacher, Miss Harris, but he seems worried that she may be too much like her predecessor. He tells Leith Faris, "She's very nice . . . but she got acquainted rather fast, I thought. She was calling me Len five minutes after we were introduced" (p. 319).

Opaly Grenn is not the only fictional teacher to suffer the ignominy of having a child out of wedlock. Two other "fallen women," both very minor characters, are Elsa Thorvaldson in E. H. Oliver's Beaver Lodge and Anita in George Ryga's Ballad of a Stone-Picker. Elsa marries Angus McKellar after having an illegitimate child by him.



This ends her teaching career, because his Scottish pride will not allow him to let his wife work after marriage. The problem of having an illegitimate child is faced differently by the Scandinavian teacher, Anita, who teaches in a small northern fishing village in The Ballad of a Stone-Picker. She has an illegitimate child by a trapper who brags about having fathered forty-two children, most of them on Indian and half-breed women. The trapper says, "She'd make a good wife, yes. But she won't have me. Takes great care of the kid--won't let me help her at all, but this school and the kids there are her life . . . . There ain't a person in the village who wouldn't show you the road out if you said a bad thing about her. They love her--especially the kids she teaches!" (p. 28).

In McCourt's Home is the Stranger, as in Tegart's In the Face of the Winds, a teacher is used to provide romantic interest but is not the heroine. In both novels the teacher is portrayed as an extremely alluring young woman who provides romantic competition for the heroine. In McCourt's novel, however, the teacher, Gail Anderson, is a local girl and the heroine, Norah Armstrong, is an outsider, having come to the prairies from Ireland as a war bride.

An important consideration in McCourt's portrayal of Gail Anderson is the fact that she is depicted through the jealous eyes of the protagonist, Norah Armstrong, who feels that her husband and Gail still have a romantic attachment from a pre-war relationship. Norah's suspicions, however, are unfounded. Rather than being in love with Norah's husband, Gail is threatened by Norah's interest in Brian Mallory, an Irishman with whom the teacher has been having a



torrid love affair. Norah's graphic and highly allusive description of Gail Anderson suggests the concern of one beautiful woman over the sexual attractiveness of a competitor:

She stood up very straight and still, a magnificent animal, Norah thought, the kind men must have hungered after, tall, long-legged, full-hipped, Diana in the flesh--or was it Aphrodite she was thinking of, Aphrodite rising from the sea, the sea-foam grey against the whiteness of her flesh? But it didn't matter. Gail's body was beautiful in a way that made you think of white sculptured marble coming to life under the hands of the sculptor who loved it. But it was the face that really held you, a face that in spite of smooth unlined skin was somehow old, and wise with the kind of wisdom that brought with it no serenity of spirit. The focal points were the green shadowed eyes, unnaturally large under thin sharply pencilled brows, and the wide red mouth. They were the eyes and the mouth of a woman who had learned a great deal. Except how to be at peace. (pp. 40-41)

Towards the end of the book, Gail reveals to Norah the depth and tempestuousness of her love for Brian Mallory. To be near him she has gone to war as a member of the C.W.A.C. and has returned to teach in the only country school still operating in the area. Gail is prepared to go wherever her lover goes without the security of marriage. She tells Norah, "Brian and I are soul-mates. Deep calling to deep. . . . Both hollow at the core. I've no illusions--about either of us. Only--I happen to love him" (p. 222). Gail also admits to Norah that because of her relationship with Mallory many people in the community think she is not fit to teach their children. She retains her position only because she is a good teacher and there is a teacher shortage.

While Gail is never shown in a teaching role, the reader is





allowed to see, in situations other than the classroom, some of the personal qualities which make her a good teacher. She is calm, competent, and efficient under stress, and she has great compassion and understanding, except in matters affecting her passionate love affair. These laudable qualities are all demonstrated when she is confronted by an escapee from a mental institution, and when she nurses Norah's child who has pneumonia.

Because Gail is generally viewed from Norah's perspective, however, these admirable personal characteristics are subordinated in the novel to the romantic side of her nature, particularly to "a quality which was a compound of naked sensuality and genuine unearthliness, identifying her spiritually with the amoral pagan deities of ancient legend" (p. 222). But Norah finally sees in Gail's all-consuming love some of the qualities of greatness. "It was more, much more than mere sensuality; it was a thing so strong, so single-hearted that it seemed almost to justify whatever moral crimes had been committed in its name" (p. 223).

Another attractive young teacher whose code of values conflicts with that of the community in which she teaches is Razia Tantamount, who "flaunted her body like a flag" (p. 227), in the Mennonite community depicted in Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many. Razia, who had hoped to get a job in the city, instead finds herself teaching "two hundred miles from nowhere" (p. 120) in the bush country of Saskatchewan, where the Mennonite colony has settled in an attempt to isolate itself from worldly influences.



Despite her "worldliness," the entire community soon comes to respect Razia's teaching ability, and after one unsuccessful attempt to organize a school dance, she seems to learn the role that is expected of her in the community. However, although she conforms outwardly to community expectations, Razia does try to maintain a measure of independence in her personal life. She chooses to live alone in a teacherage rather than "boarding out," so that she can entertain visitors freely. She is disappointed, however, to find that visitors come very infrequently. When they do come, she quickly wipes off her lipstick and hides her cigarettes and Hemingway novel.

Perhaps it is partly loneliness which causes her to be somewhat more obsessed with "things of the flesh" than meets the Deacon's approval. Razia is amply aware of her own alluring qualities and has a keen eye for the attractions of the opposite sex. For example, when she first catches a glimpse of the broad-shouldered protagonist, Thom Wiens, at a funeral, she thinks, "What a body he must have under those out-dated clothes!" (p. 150). While Deacon Block is worrying about the corrupting influence she may have on the young men of the community, she is piqued by their lack of response. The only overt response she gets is from Herb Unger, a slovenly back-sliding Mennonite, who comes to the teacherage during a snowstorm with the intention of staying the night. While she has trouble subduing Herb Unger's advances, she has even more trouble encouraging young Pete Block and Thom Wiens. She wonders

Why, in the name of Heaven, had she come to Wapiti!  
One Mennonite fool was so smitten with her he could  
only use his eyes but not speak a coherent sentence,



another knew nothing but animalism, and the third, with a body like a Greek hero, knew well enough where he could go for help with his mathematics, but no more saw her as a woman than if she had been an icicle dripping from the roof. What a sink-hole! (p. 178).

The teacher's repressed sexual desires finally find an outlet in Herb Unger's brother Hank, a World War II flying ace, who has returned to Wapiti on leave at Christmas time. Shortly after she has put on "the most religious" Christmas concert the community has ever seen, Razia and Hank Unger are discovered together in the school barn. This discovery precipitates an eruption of latent violence that has been smouldering in the supposedly non-violent community for years.

In Peace Shall Destroy Many, Razia Tantamount represents worldly influence and Hank Unger represents war, both of which the Mennonite community have been trying to avoid through isolation. The violence that is precipitated by their coming together in Wapiti on Christmas Eve illustrates Wiebe's theme in the novel--man cannot find peace, in the Christian sense, through shutting himself off from the world.

The term "siren" in reference to fictional teachers such as Opaly Grenn, Gail Anderson, and Razia Tantamount has been used in its loose modern sense--meaning simply a dangerously alluring woman. Ruth Lancaster in Frank Harrison's recent novel Step Softly on the Beaver fits this definition, but she also incorporates aspects of the classical definition. Like the sirens of classical mythology, she leads the man whom she has attracted to death by drowning.

Ruth Lancaster is a twenty-eight-year-old English girl who





comes to teach at the Big Fish Indian Reserve in northern Alberta. She left England after having been neglected as a mistress by a former teacher colleague. At the Indian school she adapts surprisingly well to a teaching situation foreign to her, but she cannot overcome her neurotic sexual obsessions so easily. She takes as a lover John Fall, one of two Indians who become objects of her sexual fantasies. Although she decries the white man's exploitation of the Indian, she proceeds to exploit John Fall ruthlessly. She is fascinated by the Indian as a lover, but when he makes plans to leave the reserve to live with her in the white-man's world her prejudice becomes apparent. She sends him into the wilderness to get her a great beaver pelt. In the meantime she makes arrangements to escape from her entanglement with him by going back to England. In attempting to bring her his prize beaver pelt, John Fall is drowned. "The death of John Fall hit Ruth very hard. She remembered her decision to free herself from him as a betrayal and became sick with herself" (p. 213). Within a few weeks, however, now that the secret of her affair with an Indian is safely concealed, she contemplates marrying a respectable white farmer, Bill Bruchk. "She could almost be glad then, not that John was dead, but that he was no more" (p. 219). On her way to meet Bruchk, she encounters John Blood, a handsome virile Indian about whom she has entertained lustful romantic fantasies since her first day in the community. On the verge of initiating an affair with him, the teacher suddenly rejects the man savagely. In a moment of intuition she realizes that she is part of the white man's poison that is corrupting and



ruining the Indian.

Ruth Lancaster, like all the other fictional teachers who serve as romance heroines or sirens, is a remarkably attractive woman. All fictional female teachers, of course, are not as attractive as those who provide romantic interest in Canadian prairie novels. Several investigators of the image of the teacher in American literature note two predominant stereotypes of the female teacher: "1) The 'sweet young thing,' involved in affairs of the heart, teaching until one of them pays off in a marriage offer. 2) The sour old maid, a comic character . . . . wielder of the birch, shrewish, and likely to be a simpering fool in the presence of men."<sup>4</sup> Arthur Foff suggests that these two images of the female teacher "are of the same woman caught at different stages of her life. If the slender, young schoolmarm fails to marry, she soon becomes the aged hag with cackling voice and dreary dress."<sup>5</sup>

In Canadian prairie fiction there are numerous examples of the old maid stereotype, such as Miss Henchbaw in W. O. Mitchell's Jake and the Kid, Miss Faraday in Storey's Prairie Harvest, and Miss Piggott, who "soured by perpetual disappointment . . . . compensated for her frustrations by ruling her little flock with an iron hand," (p. 26) in McCourt's Music at the Close. Some of the more interesting teacher-characters, however, are those who neither

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<sup>4</sup>Don C. Charles, "The Stereotype of the Teacher in American Literature," Educational Forum, XIV (March, 1950), 304.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur Foff, "Scholars and Scapegoats," English Journal, XLVII (March, 1958), 122.



fit into the "sweet young thing" category nor are willing to accept the "sour old maid" designation. One such character is Annie Frawdric in Robert Stead's The Smoking Flax. She differs markedly from McCourt's Miss Piggott, who "had failed to land" a man and "had long since given up trying" (p. 26). Annie Frawdric is still a long way from having given up trying and is popularly known in the community as "Annie Frolic." Minnie Stake refers to her as "a wily old hunter" (p. 138), and Freddie Frain says, "she's always on the hunt for a man--that's what the kids say--and hasn't much time for us" (pp. 208-209). The refreshing thing about Annie Frawdric is that she is so disarmingly frank and open about her goals, as Cal Beach notes when he meets her for the first time.

She was waiting for him to speak, so he spoke a platitude:

"It must be wonderful to teach these bright-eyed children; to see them growing up under your guidance, your counsel."

"It isn't. It's a bore, to them and to me. They come to school because they can't help themselves. I teach them for the same reason."

Her frankness was engaging. If she had said, "I am teaching school because I have failed to land a husband," he could not have understood her better. He wondered how far she would go. (pp. 65-66)

Alsina Teeswater in Arthur Stringer's The Prairie Child is particularly interesting in that she is viewed by the narrator, Chaddie McKail, as fitting into the old maid stereotype, but she turns out to be the romantic siren of the novel. Chaddie McKail feels sorry for "the bandy-legged she-teacher" (p. 4), who boarded with them, even after she catches Alsina embracing her husband, Duncan McKail. "There was desperation in the eyes of Miss Alsina



Teeswater, and it was plain to see that if my husband had been merely playing with fire it had become a much more serious matter with the lady in the case" (p. 4). As she drives the embarrassed Alsina to the station, Chaddie says, "I couldn't be cruel to that poor crushed outcast" (p. 16). At the end of the book, however, when Duncan asks Chaddie for a divorce so that he can marry a secretary in his Calgary office, Chaddie is shocked to find that the preferred woman is that same "poor crushed outcast," Miss Alsina Teeswater.

A more realistic teacher-character is Miss Ethel Hughes in Christine Van der Mark's In Due Season. On her first day of teaching in the Peace River Country during the depression, her pupils "saw with the brutal honesty of children her plain clothes, her homely face, her thick straight hair pinned into an untidy bun" (p. 64). She appears more attractive at the first school dance, wearing a white silk blouse pinned at the throat with some shining glass cherries, and with her hair curled and tied with a ribbon. Although she appears at first to be a prime candidate for the old maid stereotype, Miss Hughes marries Sven Jensen, the most eligible bachelor in the community. She accepts Sven's proposal even though he admits he first asked Lina Ashley, the female pioneer who serves as the central character in the novel. He explains to Miss Hughes that he proposed to Lina first "because I thought you wouldn't like to get stuck up here in the bush. With all your education and everything" (p. 133). While Miss Hughes may not have been Sven's first choice as a wife, according to her Ukrainian landlady she certainly did not accept him out of desperation: "Dat teacher! . . . All de men in de country





been by my house to get her to marry wit dem. . She wait, wait for de best one, you bet!" (p. 133).

Two other fictional teachers, both in novels set in Indian and Metis communities in Northern Manitoba, are less successful in their romantic endeavours. Miss Glover in Kristofferson's Tanya and Miss Langois in Forer's The Humback both make rather pathetic attempts to find romance in a community alien to them.

In Tanya Miss Glover is one of three girls smitten by the charms of the returning war hero Flight Lieutenant Joseph Quincey, D. F. C. The assessment of the personal attributes she brings to this contest varies with the observer in the novel. Willow Lebet, a local Metis beauty who is also in love with Joe, has little respect for the teacher as a romantic competitor. "Let Miss Glover have the field if she wished. Miss Glover was neither pretty nor clever, but a lady, a lady who considered herself just a little above the people of Pelican, a lady who was cold as a fish and had buck-teeth" (p. 36). Joe's father, Angus Quincey, is concerned about his son being attracted to the Metis girl but not to the teacher. "If it had been Miss Glover, Angus would never have worried. Miss Glover was a nice girl, well-mannered, above reproach" (p. 58). Joe's interest in Miss Glover, however, is short-lived and prompted, ironically, by her lack of sex-appeal. "It was rather a relief to flirt with a girl who knew it was only a flirtation and nothing more. Miss Glover was wholesome and good fun, charming without being sensuous. She didn't remind him with every glance that she was a woman" (p. 60).



While Miss Glover fails to find romance in the northern community in which she teaches she is less alone and unloved than is Miss Langois, the teacher in Mort Forer's The Humback. In her search for romance, Miss Langois suffers from the disadvantage of being a rather unattractive girl. She is described as "a dumpish-faced young woman who . . . wore rimless glasses over red-ringed eyes which showed out her self-image of plainness" (p. 185). She is also the only white woman in the village and never really feels a part of the community. Rather she pits herself against it and relishes "her meat-tasting moments of victory against the Humback challenge" (p. 186).

Despite her indomitable self-assurance in the classroom, "Miss Langois was as much afraid of being noticed as she was of being ignored" (p. 207) when she went out into the village. During a community crisis involving an approaching forest fire, "Miss Langois wanted peace, reassurance, protection, a part of someone else's strength" (p. 207). She attempts to turn for solace to the only white man in the community, Abe Epp, the storekeeper. "But Epp never picked up her cue" (p. 240)--not even when she offers to lend him the books she keeps in her bedroom. Her inability to elicit a response from Epp must be particularly morale-defeating for Miss Langois since she lives in a community where fornication is a popular sport. Unloved, she leaves Epp's store for the last time, making an unconscious but pathetic symbolic gesture. "She took a bottle of milk and clutched it to her dead breast. Epp saw the joke and quietly laughed" (p. 309).



The spinster-teacher, however, is not always only a comic or pathetic minor figure in Canadian prairie fiction. Two Western Canadian novels treat the battle of the single female teacher against the encroachments of the old maid stereotype as a major theme. These novels are Sheila Mackay Russell's The Living Earth and Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God.

Agnes Miller in The Living Earth is another red-haired, sophisticated teacher going to teach in a pioneer district. Unlike Helen Bendle (The House), Julie Lacoste (Westerly Wild), and Moira Glenn (Music at the Close), she has an M. Ed. and twenty years of teaching experience. After years of teaching in city high schools, she takes a year's leave of absence in order to return to teach in the Peace River country where she began her career. Having spent "the days of her youth" attempting to overcome the stigma of growing up as an unloved foster-child on a poor pioneer farm, she realizes how sterile the life she has created for herself is.

She had succeeded in lifting herself, in ridding herself so completely of her early life that few people guessed at the truth of her background. But where had she gone wrong? At what point had her ambition betrayed her? She had only to look at herself in retrospect to see how a spinster teacher with a frozen face and a sharp tongue had been inexorably winning the secret battle of Agnes Miller, had perhaps won it forever . . . . I am almost at the menopause, she was saying grimly to herself. And if this is all I am to have of life, I refuse to be reconciled! Somehow I must find the way back. I've spent six months looking everywhere else. It must be here in the North. It has to be . . . . (p. 12)

She finds, however, that the passage of time has alienated her from "the simple earthy" way of life with which she was once familiar.





"I waited too long, she thought. I'm set now. I wear my mould like a plaster-cast. And perhaps I don't want it any other way after all" (p. 44).

Within a few weeks of her arrival in Mud Creek, Agnes meets Carl Gunderson, the owner of a lumber-mill, who is as strong-willed as she is and less conventional. On the night he first meets the handsome, red-haired schoolmistress, he tells her, "A woman with a body like yours is wasted on school kids" (p. 59). He then serves notice that he intends to marry her. Despite her attraction to the elemental strength and simplicity of the man, she is unable to respond to him. "Though, in fancy, she might answer this man's appallingly frank mating calls with uninhibited urgency, in reality she could no more throw off the restraints imposed by the years than she could walk naked into a classroom" (p. 87). One night she does finally conquer her frigidity and respond passionately to his ardour, but deeply embarrassed, she immediately drives him cruelly from her. Soon after, she leaves the district to go to her foster-mother's death bed. There, for the first time, she learns of the depth of her foster-mother's love for her. "In the final crisis of her life, Martha's inarticulate motherhood had found the means of expressing itself" (p. 314). Agnes realizes "that in her own awkwardness in the presence of affection there lay much the same difficulty that had defeated Martha. I mustn't let it cheat me as it cheated her, she thought desperately. Somehow I must throw open the doors, all the secret hidden doors that have shut me in . . ." (p. 315). At the close of the book Agnes Miller returns to Mud Creek, hoping that this



re-evaluation of her past will allow her to break the mould of loneliness and self-centeredness which has bound her life.

Like Agnes Miller, Rachel Cameron, the central character in Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God, is "lonely and disillusioned and imprisoned by the past" (The Living Earth, p. 179).

Rachel Cameron . . . is a spinster school-teacher living with her widowed mother and locked within her own fears and inhibitions. She is avid for experience, obsessed by a need for a sexual relationship, for motherhood, and indeed for any human relationship beyond the chafing ties of duty to her mother and her guilty affection for some of the children she teaches.<sup>6</sup>

The novel, which portrays Rachel's stream-of-consciousness, reveals a highly neurotic teacher. Rachel is thirty-four years old, teaching grade two in her home town of Manawaka, Manitoba, and resentful about being forced ever more firmly into the old-maid stereotype. She finds it increasingly difficult to maintain meaningful personal relationships with people.

Part of Rachel's problem is that she, like Agnes Miller in The Living Earth, has experienced a childhood in which emotions were not expressed openly. When she is offered affection she does not know how to respond to it. She is embarrassed by her teaching colleague Calla Mackie's lack of inhibition and particularly her non-conforming fundamentalist religion. When she discovers Calla's homosexual tendencies she is shocked and revolted.

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<sup>6</sup> Clara Thomas, Margaret Laurence (Toronto: New Canadian Library, 1969), p. 9.



Rachel finally experiences a moment of triumph when she overcomes one of the most psychologically damning attributes of the stereotype by losing her virginity at the age of thirty-four. Her lover, a high school teacher from Winnipeg, deserts her at the end of the summer, but leaves her believing that she is pregnant. She faces the birth of her child with mixed feelings of hope and fear. The emotional turmoil, however, ends in anti-climax. She has a tumor not a child in her womb. But the ordeal has strengthened and matured Rachel. Under anesthetic, during the operation to remove the tumor, she murmurs, "I am the mother now" (p. 160). When she returns home, she reverses roles with her mother and takes charge of their future. She accepts a teaching position in Vancouver, and takes her mother, whom she refers to as "my elderly child" (p. 174), with her. This move westward, with its consequent breaking away from the past, represents a rather tenuous affirmation of hope and of life for Rachel.

Where I'm going anything can happen. Nothing may happen. Maybe I will marry a middle-aged widower, or a longshoreman, or a cattle-hoof-trimmer, or a barrister or a thief. And have my children in time. Or maybe not. Most of the chances are against it. But not, I think, quite all. What will happen? What will happen. It may be that my children will be temporary, never to be held. But so are everyone's. (p. 175)

Margaret Laurence's novel is the most psychologically probing study in Canadian fiction of a teacher trying to escape from the encroachment of the old maid stereotype. One of the most interesting portrayals of an older teacher firmly entrenched within its confines is Miss O'Rourke in Gabrielle Roy's Where Nests the Water Hen.



Miss O'Rorke is a classic case of the old maid stereotype, and yet, though a minor character, she is individualized to the extent that she comes close to rising above the stereotype. The author depicts the old spinster humorously, but with a sympathetic touch. Physically, Miss O'Rorke falls very much within the stereotype, possessing "a tired-looking bun of hair, a severe, sorrowful face and, behind dark-rimmed glasses, eyes expressive of a very dejected, very sad zeal" (p. 57).

Miss O'Rorke is a chronic complainer with a martyr complex. "There was no effort too troublesome for Miss O'Rorke once she had determined to change some little thing in this world where just about everything annoyed her" (pp. 59-60). She has very set opinions and is inflexible in supporting them. "Her teacher's soul would have led her to attempt the transformation of the whole world rather than to abandon a single one of her set ideas and trifling whims" (p. 58). Despite Miss O'Rorke's being "unpredictable, eccentric, and disconcerting" (p. 66), at the moment she leaves the district she is viewed with sympathy:

The unfortunate old maid was leaving, and without much feeling of relief after all. It would be no better elsewhere. For twenty-five years she had been knocking about, from job to job, and the next one in line was always a little more remote, a little deeper in the wilderness; the food was heavier and heavier, sentiments less and less refined, gratitude rarer and rarer. . . . Whenever she quit a place, in fact, she had a fairly painful time of it. With amazement she became aware that life had not been bad in the spot she was leaving. It even seemed to be moderately pleasant. And finally she would come to believe that in that place alone existence would have been possible for her. (pp. 65-66)





Canadian prairie fiction has no shortage of unmarried female teacher characters of all ages and of all stages in their teaching careers. However, there are very few married women teachers in the prairie novel. Almost invariably, when the teacher marries her teaching career ends. Sometimes, in fact, marriage is seen as an escape from teaching, as in McCourt's Music at the Close (p. 171). Moira Glenn, in McCourt's novel, is one of a handful of married teachers in prairie fiction. She teaches in a country school while separated from her first husband and then in Edmonton while her second husband is overseas during the Second World War. Another fictional teacher who returns to the classroom because of the teacher shortage during the war is Millie Peters in Barbara Villy Cormack's Local Rag. In Robert Hunter's Erebus and Lorenz Neufeld's Aurora, married women teach in the same schools as their husbands during the post-World War II period, and in W. O. Mitchell's The Kite Helen Maclean returns to teaching after she becomes a widow. In Grudge, by Frank Webber, Luella Kestor teaches in northern Alberta during the early war years, while her husband, a small time farmer-fisherman, stays home to do the housework. Her career, however, is cut short when she cannot agree with the school inspector about the importance of art and social studies in relation to the three R's. In all of these novels the married woman schoolteacher plays a minor role.

The fact that married teachers have begun to find a place only in novels published after World War II can probably be attributed both to the growing realism in prairie fiction and to the changing composition of the actual teaching force. In general, an overview of



prairie fiction of the past fifty years reveals trends toward the portrayal of the female teacher as being better educated, less inhibited, more likely to have an urban background, and more likely to be married than was previously the case.

Although teaching is referred to as a woman's job in a few novels, about a third of the teachers depicted in prairie novels of the past half century are men. The majority of these men are minor characters and, unlike fictional female teachers, their personal lives are usually subordinate to their professional roles.

In a number of instances the male teacher is used to provide romantic interest. He is seldom pictured in traditionally heroic terms, however, and is frequently unsuccessful in his romantic endeavours. A good example is Dan Root in Christine Van der Mark's In Due Season, one of the few prairie novels that has a male teacher as protagonist. Dan Root, who is not yet twenty years old, has worked as an usher and dishwasher, and failed as a farmhand, before obtaining his first teaching position in a rural Alberta district during the depression. Despite his physical frailty, the musically-talented and scholarly young man wins the confidence of the community and the love of Fenna Leniuk, the oldest girl in the school. One evening, while she helps him bag candy for the Christmas concert, he kisses her. Suddenly "an icy hand gripped his heart . . . He became conscious of the enormity of his actions, making love to a young girl whose father trusted him, kissing a pupil of his school, leaping that barrier which always lies between teacher and student, a barrier which is never set aside lightly" (p. 106). Though their



love is mutual, Dan tries to explain to Fenna that they cannot afford to get married because he earns only forty dollars per month. He insists, "I've got to get some education if I'm ever going to get anywhere" (p. 106). By the time Dan does propose, asking Fenna to wait three or four years until he can get his degree, she has already promised to marry Philip Jebson, the preacher.

Instances of unrequited love of a teacher for a former student are found in Grace Campbell's Fresh Winds Blowing and E. A. McCourt's Walk Through the Valley. In Fresh Winds Blowing, the teacher, Hank MacAllister, "dark and slim and thirtyish" (p. 8), refuses to let beautiful Kari Andreson pass out of his life when she passes out of his grade twelve class. He attempts to prevent her from withdrawing into herself from grief at the loss of her twin brother during the Second World War. Thinking that a change of scene will do her good, he arranges for her to leave Saskatchewan to get a job in his sister's florist shop in Montreal. In Montreal she marries a British airman, Jeff Gilbride. When Jeff is reported missing in action, Hank MacAllister, who was exempted from the armed services because of a lame foot, resigns from his teaching position in Saskatchewan and goes to Montreal to comfort Kari. His hopes of eventually marrying her are shattered, however, when her husband is discovered to be alive. Kari recognizes that while Hank is trying to share her joy at Jeff's return he is hiding personal disappointment.

Hank was good, she told herself. He was, in fact, one of the best persons she had ever known. He had lifted his own disappointment into concern and care for her. She felt a rush of affection for him. Ever since she had known him, he had been looking after her. He had





tried to direct her life, to protect and steady her. And he had done that. She owed a great deal to him.

She told him so, one day as they drove along the road that edged the south shore of the river.

Hank nodded. "I tried to arrange your life for you, and it back-fired on me." He smiled reassuringly at her. "It's all right, Kari. I'll love you at long distance." (pp. 26-27)

There are a number of similarities between the romantic situation of Hank MacAllister and that of Lauchlan Frazer in McCourt's Walk Through the Valley. Like Hank, Lauchlan is in love with a former student, Sheila Troy. Sheila is fond of Lauchlan, but after meeting the dashing whiskey-smuggler, Blaze Corrigan, she finds the country schoolteacher dull and prosaic. Lauchlan's action borders on the heroic, however, when, because of "some unexpected stirring of ancient border blood, or perhaps pity for Sheila's anguish" (p. 193), he takes the risk of warning Blaze Corrigan about a trap the RCMP have set for him. After the death of Sheila's father, which results from his involvement with Blaze Corrigan, Lauchlan helps the family resettle in town. At the conclusion of the novel, Sheila's younger brother, Michael, considers the possible future of his sister and his teacher. "Maybe Sheila would marry Lauchlan Frazer. Lauchlan had been fine. He had warned Blaze Corrigan away from the house that night. He had been good to them all in their trouble. Always near at hand it seemed but never in the way. He would be good to Sheila. And in time Sheila might even come to love Lauchlan" (p. 214). Michael realizes, though, that Sheila's love for Lauchlan would never be as fiercely passionate as her love for Blaze Corrigan. Country schoolteachers, it seems, are seldom depicted as inspiring emotions of



high romance.

Not all romances between teachers and students fail because of rejection of the teacher by the student. Sometimes the teacher perceives too great a difference in age or social status between himself and the girl he loves. In Illia Kiriak's Sons of the Soil, however, it is neither the teacher-student social barrier nor the difference in age which deters the teacher. In this novel, Mr. Goodwin, a young man teaching in a pioneer Ukrainian district, decides to renounce his love for a student because of the cultural differences between them.

"There is too wide a distance between our ways of life," Goodwin wrote in his diary. "But what a strange distance, so near and yet so far. I see her near me, feel her presence and hear her heart beat and yet she is very far away from me. . . ."

"To uproot her from her natural surroundings and transplant her in foreign soil would probably be disastrous. Where would I go with her? Our ways of life are too different, centuries of tradition, a vastly different heritage, alien customs and religion, have set us too far apart to make normal adjustments, much less happiness, possible." (p. 243)

Romances between teachers and students, however, do not always prove unsuccessful. Two men teaching in country schools prior to World War I, Bob Terry in Gladys Taylor's Pine Roots, and Harold Henderson in G. Herbert Sallan's Little Man, both marry former students considerably younger than themselves. In fact, Bob Terry's bride was born approximately the same year that he first came to teach in the district.

While the teacher-student romantic relationship is certainly not rare in prairie fiction, the teacher-teacher relationship is even



more common. For example, Woodrow Ormond in Grove's Our Daily Bread and Fred Thompson in MacTavish's For a Better Tomorrow both marry attractive young women on their teaching staffs. The same happy fate seems to be awaiting James Digby as W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind draws to a close. David, the teacher-protagonist in Lorenz Neufeld's Aurora, marries one teacher and has an affair with another, and Rachel Cameron, the central character in Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God, finally succeeds in losing her virginity with a high school teacher from Winnipeg, Nick Kazlick. In the final chapters of Stringer's The Prairie Child, a romance is budding between the rural teacher Gershom Binks and the city teacher Lossie Brown, who were brought together by a mutual interest in the narrator's son.

The romantic interest of male teachers in their female students and colleagues is probably as much attributable to the scarcity of other eligible young women in prairie communities as it is to proximity and frequency of contact. The male teacher is often depicted as a scholarly person, somewhat alienated from other men in the community whose values are primarily physical and economic. This being the case, it is perhaps natural that these teachers should become attracted to women in the community who hold cultural values, even though these women may be married. Such is the situation involving Paul Kirby in Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House and Gershom Binks in Arthur Stringer's The Prairie Child.

Paul Kirby, the schoolteacher in As For Me and My House, is typical of a number of sensitive individuals in Canadian prairie novels who feel a tension between the attraction of life on the land and a



thirst for education. He has alienated himself from the land through acquiring an education and becoming a teacher, yet he is still drawn to it. Paul continually refers to himself as a "country boy myself, you know--still really belong there" (p. 7). He is teaching in the town of Horizon now, though, and is no longer at home either in the country or in the town. Mrs. Bentley says of him:

He's so humble about being just a country boy, yet so stubbornly proud of it. Humble because it's born in his country bones to be that way, because he still shares instinctively the typical countryman's feeling of disadvantage before town people who wear smarter clothes or write a better hand. Proud because he's come to know these town people and see them for what they really are, to discover that most of his own values have been sounder all the time. (p. 70)

The loneliness of Paul's position is illustrated the Sunday he dresses in his new blue suit with a fancy stripe, stunning tan shoes, and a pearl-grey fedora in order to impress Mrs. Bentley when he goes with her and Philip to the rural church service at Partridge Hill. The city-bred Mrs. Bentley condescendingly describes him as looking "like a farmer at a picnic in his Sunday best" (p. 53). However, in church, seated across from a farmer dressed in a freshly ironed work shirt and faded blue overalls, "Paul, dressed up so naively in his finery, felt it a rebuke. Other times he stands round talking after the service, but in shame for his shoes and fedora today he slipped off to the car and waited in the back seat till we were ready to go" (p. 54).

Paul is proud of having grown up on a ranch, claiming that this experience has taught him self-reliance. He not only continues to ride his horse in town, but also encourages Steve, the boy who is





a mote in the eyes of Horizon's self-righteous, to do likewise. In explaining this action to the Bentleys, Paul reveals much about his self-concept. He states that he allows Steve to ride because "the horse is good for him. Good for his self-respect. You can't ride a horse and feel altogether worthless, or be altogether convinced that society's little world is the last word. If I had a boy of my own that's what he'd do. There's no better way to grow a mind" (p. 36). Later in the book, however, when he returns to Horizon to start another school year, Paul is more skeptical concerning his theory that a boy ought to grow up alone with a horse. "Unless he intends staying among horses. He's not much good afterwards for getting along with people" (p. 127).

Mrs. Bentley says of Paul, "He's a born scholar--with the enthusiasm and humility for it, even if not the background" (p. 85). Perhaps it was the stigma he felt in the cultured world concerning his rural background that caused Paul to develop his interest in philology. Unable to hold back the knowledge that he has about word origins, he gratuitously passes out this information at every opportunity. Describing her first meeting with Paul, Mrs. Bentley says, "Rather apologetically he explained that he couldn't help himself--he was a philologist at heart if not any other way. 'Philologist, you know--lover of words'" (p. 8). Even in the matter of philology Paul is frustrated by "the uselessness of being right against the world" (p. 36). As Mrs. Bentley explains, "Paul has his troubles too. He has been telling his pupils that belly is a perfectly good, respectable word, to be used whenever it's belly



they're talking about, but the town is pursing its lips against such sanction of vulgarity. 'Cows may have them,' says Mrs. Wenderby, 'and you, Mr. Kirby, but not my daughter Isobel or I'" (p. 70).

About a month later Paul receives another note from Mrs. Wenderby warning him that if he insists on saying "sweat" in the classroom instead of "perspiration" she'll use her influence to have the school board ask him to resign. If the knowledge of philology is Paul Kirby's subconscious attempt to ensure his place in the educated world, it is apparently not of much use in Horizon.

Paul Kirby is not without a literary precedent in Canadian prairie fiction. In a number of respects he resembles Gershom Binks, the young school teacher in Stringer's The Prairie Child. While Gershom does not seem so much of an alien in his own land as Paul does, "in the original Hebrew 'Gershom' not inappropriately means 'a stranger there'" (p. 40). The most obvious similarity between Paul and Gershom is their inability to suppress the tendency to impart gratuitous information.<sup>7</sup> Paul limits himself to being a professed authority on philology, but Gershom Binks is an authority on everything. Chaddie McKail says of Gershom, "There's nothing wrong with the boy except for his ineradicable temptation to impart to you his gratuitous tidbits of information. I can't object, of course, to Gershom having a college education; what I do object to

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<sup>7</sup>In this respect both Paul Kirby and Gershom Binks are in the tradition of Shakespeare's pedantic schoolmaster, Holofernes, who is described as having been "at a great feast of languages and stolen the scraps" (Love's Labour's Lost, V, i, 36-37).



is his trying to give me one. I don't mind his wisdom, but I do hate to see him tear the whole tree of knowledge up by the roots and floor one with it" (p. 83). Examples of Gershom's "gratuitous tidbits of information" are the following: "that one half ounce of the web of the spider--the arachnid of the order Araneida. . . if stretched out in a straight line would reach from the city of Chicago to the city of Paris" (p. 41); "that there are estimated to be 30,000,000,000,000 red blood corpuscles in the body" (p. 84); "that blood travels at the rate of seven miles an hour, and that if all the energy of Niagara Falls were utilized it could supply the world with seven million horse power" (p. 251). He even exhibits some excellence in Paul Kirby's field of philology as he chides Chaddie for saying, "The goose hangs high," claiming that it is "merely a vulgar corruption for 'The goose whangs high,' the 'whanging' being the call of the wild geese high in the air when the weather is settled and fair" (p. 84). Like Paul, Gershom takes himself very seriously; however, after months of taking Chaddie's teasing without seeming to catch on, he suddenly reveals a sense of humor. Chaddie says, "I asked Gershom today if he could possibly tell me how many Parker House rolls a square mile of wheat running forty bushels to the acre would make. And he surprised me by inquiring how many quarts of buttermilk it would take to shingle a cow. Gershom is widening out a bit. . ." (p. 157).

Much of the apparent similarity between the two characters Paul Kirby and Gershom Binks is due to the similarity in structure and content of As For Me and My House and The Prairie Child. Both





novels are first person diary accounts of women concerned with domestic problems. The two young teachers serve somewhat similar functions in the lives of the two women. When Gershom first arrives Chaddie says, "The mere presence of another male at Casa Grande seems to dilute the acids of home life" (p. 40). This statement is certainly an equally appropriate description of how Mrs. Bentley views Paul Kirby.

Both Paul and Gershom fall in love with the married woman who narrates the novel. The sense of honour and bashfulness of both prevent them from expressing their feelings. Mrs. Bentley denies the romantic connection with Paul of which her husband accuses her. In her mental comparisons of Paul and Philip, her husband always comes out ahead, yet she enjoys Paul's companionship and continues to invite him for supper even when Paul feels uncomfortable about it and tries to avoid her. Mrs. Bentley is so starved for company that she may not be fully conscious of the effect she has on Paul; Mrs. McKail, however, is fully conscious of the attraction she has for Gershom Binks, enjoys it, and takes delight in making him feel uncomfortable about it. The height of her callousness towards her boarder's tender feelings is her embroidering with red yarn an arrow-pierced heart on one leg of his B.V.D.s. (p. 119).

The character of Paul Kirby, although not fully developed, is rooted in the Canadian prairie setting. Gershom Binks, in the instances where he is idealized as a scholar and teacher, hearkens back to an earlier tradition--that of Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford and Goldsmith's Village Schoolmaster. Described in the Canadian



setting, however, by a woman who affects both culture and a Western idiom, the following portrait of Gershom Binks is one of the most favorable descriptions of the prairie school teacher.

. . . I could see Gershom surrounded by a multi-colored group of little figures, as he stopped to fix a strap-buckle on the school-bag of one of his pupils. And as he stood there in the slanting afternoon sunlight surrounded by his charges he suddenly made me think of the tall old priest in Sorolla's Triste Herencia surrounded by his waifs. I caught the echo of something benignant and Lincoln-like from that raw-boned figure in the big-lensed eye-glasses and the clothes that didn't quite fit him. And my respect for Gershom went up like a Chinook-fanned thermometer. He took those children of his seriously. He liked them. He was trying to give them the best that was in him. And that solemn purpose saved him, redeemed him, ennobled his baldness just as it ennobled the baldness of the four-square little frame building behind him. I don't know why it was, but for some reason or other that picture of the northern prairie and the gaunt school-teacher surrounded by his pupils in the thinning afternoon sunlight became memorable to me. (p. 139-40)

Gershom Binks, being neither handsome nor heroic but a dedicated and effective teacher, is typical of the majority of male teachers in Canadian prairie fiction. Fictional teachers other than those already described in this chapter that fall into this category include James Digby in Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, Fritz Leiman in Van der Mark's In Due Season, Joseph Dueck in Weibe's Peace Shall Destroy Many, Matt Flanagan in Harrison's Step Softly on the Beaver, and Ian MacTavish in Lysenko's Yellow Boots. As the following quotations indicate, physical attractiveness and teaching ability are not closely correlated for male teachers as they are for female teachers. The effective male teacher is described in far more realistic terms than is the highly idealized female teacher.



W. O. Mitchell, for example, states that "Digby could not be called a handsome man, largely because of the angularity of his face. His skin had the weathered look of split rock that has lain long under sun and wind. His sandy eyebrows were unruly over eyes of startling blueness; his hair lay in one fair shock over his forehead" (Who Has Seen the Wind, p. 70). Joseph Dueck is described as having a gentle smile which spread over his "strong, rather ugly, tanned face, up into the black-bushed eyebrows and hair" (Peace Shall Destroy Many, p. 34); Ian MacTavish's face has "a fox-like appearance, with its brush of sandy hair, sharp nose and greenish-grey eyes" (Yellow Boots, p. 5); and Paul Kirby is "sandy-haired, blunt-faced, rather small and plain" (As For Me and My House, p. 7). Fritz Lieman is "a big, fair-haired young man with mild eyes behind rimless glasses. Somewhat above medium height, he had slightly stooped shoulders, as though his length made him self-conscious" (In Due Season, p. 197). Matt Flanagan, on the other hand, is extremely self-conscious about his short stature (Step Softly on the Beaver, p. 18). While the effective female teacher in prairie fiction is almost invariably conventionally beautiful, it is evident that the male teacher is not typically tall, dark, and handsome.

Male teachers in prairie fiction do not seem to be stereotyped to the same extent as female teachers, and their pedagogical effectiveness is not as closely related to their age and romantic success. Older female teachers are consistently portrayed as being rigid and uninspired in the classroom because they have been perpetually frustrated and embittered in their personal lives.



On the other hand, older male teachers such as Grove's Mr. Blaine (Fruits of the Earth) and Mr. Crawford (The Yoke of Life), Evans' Sylvester Herrick (Dream out of Dust), and Childerhose's Hans Kleiser (Winter Racehorse) are all reasonably well respected for their teaching ability.

All fictional male teachers, however, are not depicted as being personally well-adjusted. Nick Kazlick in Laurence's A Jest of God, like Dr. Svarich in Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, is a second generation Ukrainian-Canadian struggling with a personal problem of cultural alienation. He does not know whether to feel proud or ashamed of having sprung from, and risen above, poor Ukrainian parents, and of having rejected his ethnic heritage.

Willard Sidley, the school principal in A Jest of God, and Mr. MacFarland in George Ryga's The Ballad of a Stone-Picker are both depicted as being sadistic, and Mr. MacFarland, in addition, is suspected of being a homosexual. The stone-picker, who narrates the latter novel in a dramatic monologue, gives the following vivid description of Mr. MacFarland:

My first teacher in school was Mr. MacFarland, who was short of breath, and had a moustach which he combed when he thought nobody was watching. At school picnics, he shook hands with the women and hugged the men up tight.

"It's funny, but his cheek smells--of lavender," my old man said after he'd been hugged.

"I was . . . an infantryman in . . . the British Army!" These are among the first words I remember him saying when I began school. I kept dropping my pencil one afternoon and it kept getting under his skin. Then it fell once more, careful though I was, and Mr. MacFarland brought me down suddenly aiming his yardstick at my head and making a "pow-pow" shooting noise. I was scared--wetting-the-pants scared, for there was





hate in his eyes when he did that. (pp. 23-24)

The most extreme portrait of a mentally unbalanced teacher is that of Mr. Laughlin, an escapee from a mental institution, in McCourt's Home is the Stranger. Mr. Laughlin, who has reportedly killed a man, was driven to insanity by a scandal over what he claims was an unjust accusation that he had molested one of the little girls in his class.

In a gallery of fictional teachers that includes a large number of undistinguished looking ordinary men and the odd sadist, sexual pervert, or lunatic, it is not surprising that there should be at least one visionary. This role is filled by Konrad in Robert Hunter's Erebus. The narrator states, "His energy is beginning to exhaust me. I get an impression of a whirl-wind existence, a steady rupturing of his accepted ideas, a tearing down and pulverizing of almost everything he's been taught, an endless search for new knowledge, an unquenchable thirst" (p. 105). He has a firm belief that a more advanced form of life exists on other planets, and on lonely camping trips he attempts to establish telepathic communication with "men from another world in the hope they might teach him things that could benefit our own world" (p. 53). He has spent years at university studying first law, then art, but "he can't shake his social conscience" (p. 53). Konrad finally leaves university with a teaching certificate, "convinced that Western society is going to its doom. What he must do is introduce an element of sanity--a minor shot in the arm of the world" (p. 52). Accordingly, he opens a progressive school which he sees "as a springboard--one



of many--for the better world" (p. 64).

The teacher as a literary character in prairie fiction fulfills a number of roles. The female teacher often provides romantic interest--either as the novel's heroine or as a rival to the heroine. Teachers who serve as romantic heroines are generally extremely talented and outstandingly successful in the classroom. Those who serve as rivals in romance to the fictional heroine are also often depicted as pedagogically effective, though somewhat less inhibited socially than what the community expects of teachers. The female teacher who is unsuccessful romantically soon feels the encroachment of the old-maid stereotype. Most frequently the personal frustrations which accompany the teacher's being frozen into the stereotype adversely affect her teaching performance. Occasionally, female public school teachers are depicted as aspiring academics. Since World War II there have also been a few married teachers portrayed in minor roles in the prairie novel.

The typical male teacher in prairie fiction is neither handsome nor heroic, but is usually an effective teacher. Though he is often depicted as having personal idiosyncracies, with but a few notable exceptions, he is treated sympathetically by novelists. The male teacher is less often a figure of romance than the female teacher. When the male teacher is romantically involved it is usually with a student or former student, a teaching colleague, or a married woman who shares his cultural interests. He is often a lonely, scholarly man who can find few close friends in the prairie community who share his interests and values. Occasionally teachers are depicted



as personally maladjusted individuals. Of course, the fact that they are ill-adjusted may be the reason why they are in the novels in the first place. Fiction is seldom written about people who have no problems.





### CHAPTER III

#### THE TEACHER IN A PROFESSIONAL ROLE

In Westerly Wild, Vera Lysenko makes the fullest attempt of any Western Canadian novelist to tell the story of the prairie teacher. In so doing, she portrays in considerable detail not only the teaching conditions on the prairies during the depression, but also the goals, aspirations, and instructional techniques of her heroine, Julie Lacoste, a creative and resourceful teacher. Julie has given up a chance to study art in Europe in order to teach in Fair Prospect, a school district in southwestern Saskatchewan so depressed that the people there had "a hard time getting teachers because there wasn't money even to feed them" (p. 31). While teaching in this drought-stricken area, Julie sees herself as working within "the tradition of the Canadian country schoolteacher" (p. 121). She says, "Many a teacher has made her home in such communities as Fair Prospect, living in crowded quarters and putting up with many discomforts so that she might spread learning among unlearned people" (p. 121).

Julie, who has had five years of teaching experience, a university education, and numerous cultural advantages, is not depicted as a typical country schoolteacher of the depression era. She is told, "You're different from any other teacher we've ever had--scared little girls, most of them, with only the most rudimentary notions of teaching. Some of them couldn't spell



properly or keep their registers in order, let alone cope with a catastrophe of nature" (p. 93).

In explaining her decision to become a teacher, Julie says, "I did once have dreams of an artistic career. I could play the piano, sketch, sing a bit. One day a wise teacher suggested to me that with so many small talents, I could utilize them all best by becoming a schoolteacher" (p. 31). Before the year is over, Julie realizes that from the standpoint of her own personal development, as well as that of her students, she has made the right choice in becoming a teacher:

"I decided that life, for me, was stronger and richer, even in this hostile environment, than it would have been in Paris. I laugh now at the dreams I had, especially when I contrast them with the real thing I see every day . . . fifty-five children sitting practically on top of each other . . . . Classes on a split-second timing schedule. . . . Papers to mark in piles almost a foot high, several times a week. . . . Hot soup made in a wash basin, for the children's lunch every day . . . . Mark, I've been fighting with every bit of myself, growing every single day, only not in the direction I thought I was headed for. My perspective has changed, too. Carl's future seems immensely important to me now, and I can see that it really is, much more than making daubs on a bit of canvas and telling myself this was the life."

". . . art, for me, will go into the life of my pupils. It will give them a new way of looking at things. Fifty-five pairs of eyes have grown larger since I came here. They've seen things they never saw before. Colours and shapes, small beauties that used to be invisible to them. Only think, they'll keep that power all through life, and may pass it on to their children. That's an achievement in art, as great as anything I might have achieved by actually painting." (pp. 93-94)

Julie finds that the fine arts help to provide the "rich experiencing" (p. 19) necessary to offset the deadening effects of



the depression on her students. Julie says, "Children need colour, change, adventure. That's one of the exciting things about being a child. You can respond so much more to the stimulus of discovery" (p. 18). When she is questioned about teaching art, rhythms, piano, and French to the students, Julie bursts out indignantly, "Why shouldn't the children have the best that fine arts have to offer? . . . Why wait until people get into institutions before giving them the arts and crafts? It's especially needed here, where people live under tension" (p. 38). She then goes on to explain, "I don't teach them all as separate subjects. . . . I simply incorporate them into a regular curriculum" (p. 38).

Julie's "regular curriculum" frequently includes projects, such as writing the social history of the community, studying the cultural background of various ethnic groups represented by pupils in the class, and studying Indian customs through puppetry. These projects are intended to form centers of interest around which each pupil can learn content as well as develop skills and creative abilities. Although Julie is a many-talented person herself, she has other interested people in the community come to the school to teach woodworking, crafts, and gymnastics.

A major aim of the teacher is "to bring the great world to the small community" (p. 52). This the students accomplish "by reading papers, books, and magazines, and discussing, on the basis of their reading, such topics as the drought, the search for rust-free wheat, the grain market, the electrification of rural areas" (p. 52).



Another major aim is to have her students discover "the excitement of their own surroundings" (p. 154). On her first day in the community, Julie explores the immediate environment, looking for possible sources for nature science lessons and thinking, "I'll have to teach my pupils to use what they have; that's the basis of true scientific methods, after all" (p. 19). Later, to further stimulate her pupils' interest in their immediate surroundings, she purchases a microscope for them. Their new-found delight in nature is revealed not only in science class, but also in their prose writing, poetry, and oral language.

But Julie is not content to have her pupils study their environment only in its present blighted state. She teaches them what scientific agriculture can do to overcome the farmers' present dilemma. "So that the children should not grow up to consider themselves helpless pawns before the mighty forces of nature, Julie related to them how they could direct those forces by modifying their own surroundings, by moulding patterns of life, and by creating symbols of beauty to which they could aspire" (p. 214). In order that the children can instruct the parents in these matters, she invites the whole community to a tree-planting ceremony in the schoolyard.

Julie's curriculum is based not only on integration of subject matter around topics of social concern, but also on the concept of individual differences. She says, "Children aren't adult midgets . . . . Each is an individual with a real character of its own" (p. 30). Despite the burden of having fifty-five children in her class, the





young teacher is concerned about the social and emotional needs of each; "for each demanded particular attention--the shy child, the worrier, the bully, the backward one--all had their own problems" (p. 170).

Julie, however, is more successful in dealing with her pupils' personal problems than with her own. She becomes emotionally involved with Marcus Haugen, a rebel in the community who is later found to have a mad wife locked up in his house. When the scandal breaks in the community, Julie leaves the district because she fears her influence over the children will be gone. Although it is difficult for her to leave the pupils to whom she has become so attached, she takes comfort "in seeing the seeds she had sown sprouting in the minds of the children" (p. 278). Tony Kovach, the young man who agrees to take over the school for the few weeks remaining in the term, assures her that her work has not been in vain: "When you came from the outside Julie, bringing fresh ideas, you opened a window to the big world" (p. 278).

Although no other teacher in prairie fiction is portrayed in a classroom situation to the extent that Julie Lacoste is, many fictional teachers share her conception of the role of the teacher. Throughout the pioneer and depression periods on the prairie, many fictional teachers depicted sympathetically by novelists see themselves as culture bearers, or dispensers of "sweetness and light". Lind Archer in Ostenso's Wild Geese teaches her pupils "to look for beauty in every living thing" (p. 103); Ian MacTavish in Lysenko's Yellow Boots tries "to develop every pupil by making each day a



complete creative entity" (p. 33); and Miss Hestor, who "was nuts about Shakespeare," is remembered by a former student in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock for wanting "to light lamps in the darkness of our minds" (p. 71). John Crawford in Grove's Yoke of Life, like Julie Lacoste, deliberately chooses to teach in a country school because he thinks it is a shame that "in a pioneer district genius is left to exhaust itself in the fight against adversity" (p. 81).

In Nellie McClung's Purple Springs, Pearl Watson addresses a community gathering in the schoolhouse about what she has learned at Normal School. The following excerpt from her speech indicates that the faculty of the teacher training institution deliberately set out to instill in their students the attitude of culture bearers:

The teachers at the Normal talked to us every Friday afternoon, about our social duties, and rural leadership and community spirit and lots of things. . . . Dr. McLean said teachers were people who got special training for their work, and it was up to them to work at it, in school and out. He said that when we went out to teach, we could be a sort of social cement, binding together all the different units into one coherent community, for that's what was needed in Canada with its varied population. One third of the people in Canada do not speak English, and that's a bad barrier--and can only be overcome by kindness. We must make our foreign people want to learn our language, and they won't want to, unless they like us. (p. 102)

While many teachers see themselves as culture bearers for an educationally deprived people, this role is most apparent when the teacher is employed in a non-Anglo-Saxon district. In R. W. Campbell's A Policeman from Eton, a "schoolma'am from Oxford" teaching in a pioneer community of Galician immigrants feels that "it is so nice to mould a fresh community to one's will" (p. 241).



This "charming, dark-haired, dark-eyed lady" (p. 230) describes her teaching experiences in this community of new Canadians as follows:

"The first few days were trying. A few small Galician children arrived. They would not speak, look up or move; just hung their heads and seemed rooted to the ground. Not a word of English did they understand. I felt baffled. . . . At the end of the week I had eleven of them. Something had to be done. So I drew horses, cows, pigs, and hens on the board. Then I made them name each drawing in their own tongue; when they did so I immediately gave them the English name and made them repeat and repeat it. For days they were running round the Valley shouting ' 'orse,' 'peeg,' 'cow,' and so on. Of course they were awfully shy, and I had to win them with smiles and tender caresses, but once started in school they are remarkably keen. They love books, pictures, and the gramophone, for they know nothing of the arts at home. I was so astonished how their faces rapidly changed from the dullness of serfdom to confidence and laughter. The job is not to get them into school, but to get them to go home. Sometimes when I tell them to put their things away they ask, 'Is it home time?' 'Yes, children, it is four o'clock.' 'That's too soon, teacher; we will stay till five o'clock,' and they stay." (p. 239)

Mr. Goodwin, in Illia Kiriak's Sons of the Soil (a novel originally written in Ukrainian), also has the experience of being the first teacher in a community of Eastern European immigrants. On the first day of school he is surprised to find that all the parents have come to school with their children. During registration procedures half of the twenty-eight pupils, frightened by stories told to them about school by their parents, run off into the woods. Goodwin has the remainder of them go through a drill while he gives commands in English and performs the actions himself. "He was happy that he had discovered a method of teaching children who didn't understand a word of his language" (p. 237). Meanwhile, "the school





board, lined up along the wall, watched the proceedings and wondered when the real work of teaching would begin; that is the learning of the alphabet" (p. 237).

After school is dismissed, while the parents debate the apparent shortcomings of this first lesson, Goodwin organizes games for the children.

The children had taken to them enthusiastically, for nothing else could have dispelled so effectively the impression their parents had given them of school as a kind of prison-house where the slightest mistakes were sure to bring swift and humiliating punishment. Indeed some of the boys had come prepared for this eventuality by padding the seats of their pants.

These preparations had proved to be wholly unnecessary. As time went on, Goodwin showed himself a born teacher. He liked children and soon gained their confidence. This was shown by the way they lagged behind after school was over, and by the way they kept repeating the lessons as they slowly wended their way home. (p. 239)

The teacher soon wins the confidence of the parents, too.

Many of them begin dropping in at the school in the evenings to take lessons from Goodwin.

But as for Goodwin it made no difference to him; he taught everyone who came to the school. A born pedagogue, he took no account of time or health in his eagerness to impart education, adopting whatever method he thought practical under the circumstances. If he thought he could do better by taking all the pupils outdoors, he did so, teaching them the names of everything living or dead that was visible. And he was surprised at his own success, both with the young and the old pupils who, one and all, competed with each other for the praise of the teacher. (p. 243)

Another devoted teacher in a Ukrainian Canadian community is Ian MacTavish in Vera Lysenko's Yellow Boots. Like Mr. Goodwin in Sons of the Soil, he thinks of himself as a culture bearer and has a



deep respect for the qualities and customs of the people he serves. Unlike Campbell's "School Ma'am from Oxford," MacTavish and Goodwin do not maintain an attitude of superiority toward the people. In fact both teachers attempt to learn the native language of their students.

MacTavish's goals as a teacher in the immigrant community are set forth explicitly.

MacTavish, as he looked at his class, so full of joy and vigour, despite their shaggy and unkempt appearance, reviewed the goals he had set for himself: to broaden their horizons, to help the parents to adjust themselves, to develop every pupil by making each day a complete creative entity. For some of his pupils, he knew, that one day might constitute their entire formal education. He was excited, therefore, to think that he was, so to speak, scratching on new ground. Having in him much of the pioneering spirit of his Scottish ancestors, he felt it was a challenge to him to make book readers of the descendants of the men and women in sheepskin coats. (p. 34)

Few novelists express educational philosophy so clearly and explicitly through their fictional characters as does Vera Lysenko in Yellow Boots and Westerly Wild. In Westerly Wild the heroine, Julie Lacoste, both expounds and practises progressive education. Another teacher in the novel, Bertha Schnabel, claims that "some people here don't appreciate the advantages of modern education. They're always hollering at me to cut out some of those useless subjects" (p. 38). Whereas Julie is an exemplar of progressive education, Bertha is an example of why the spirit of the movement rarely reached the classroom level. Bertha, who has taught fifteen years on a second-class certificate because she can not afford to go to university, tells Julie, "Maybe I can't give them the frills



you can, Julie. I haven't had the training you've had. But I do give them a solid foundation. We stick to realities in my class" (p. 38).

Luella Kestor in Frank Webber's Grudge loses her school because she does not agree with the progressive education curriculum which the school inspector insists she implement in her classroom during the early 1940's. Her husband explains to a friend how Luella lost her job:

"Got into an argument with the Inspector. It seems she ain't much stuck on this new system of education they got here in Alberta. Too much social studies and arts; not enough readin', writin', and arithmetic. Anyway the Inspector told her she'd have to teach the course that was given her, or he'd find someone that would. She sent them her resignation. (p. 178)

The situation between teacher and inspector is reversed in Sheila MacKay Russell's The Living Earth, where Agnes Miller, a teacher with an M.Ed. and twenty years of teaching experience, takes a teaching position in the Peace River region of Alberta. When she confronts the inspector, David Jerome, with the lack of educational progress in the division, he is forced to beat "an ignominious retreat from her" (p. 70). The inspector admits that he has become disheartened in his attempts at educational improvement because of the size of the school division, the shortage of qualified staff, and the high rate of teacher turnover: "I'd like to show you around this division sometime. It covers close to four thousand square miles. Out of about sixty schoolrooms, twenty are without properly qualified teachers. Two-thirds of the total staff changed last year" (p. 82).

When the inspector asks Miss Miller what she thinks the aims



of education should be, she responds, "I'm a Deweyite, Mr. Jerome. Produce a whole, well-rounded personality. Teach the child how to live with his fellows" (p. 94). She claims, "I've devoted the best years of my life to progressive education in this province. And here's Mud Creek giving every evidence of never having heard of education of any description. It's enough to destroy one's faith in man's future" (p. 82).

In a more recent novel, Robert Hunter's Erebus, the teacher Konrad sees the free school movement as being one last hope for the salvation of Western society:

He has a large vision of kids graduating--a trickle at first, then a stream, and eventually, he hopes, a torrent. Sane kids. Permitted all through school to be happy, to do what they damn well feel like, to get all the meanness and pettiness out of their systems. And then emerge--healthy natural creatures whose potential influence for good in a world fast going mad is incalculable. He sees his School as a springboard--one of many--for the better world.  
(p. 64)

Another teacher who apparently sees her role as that of instilling in her students a vision of a better world is mentioned briefly in George Ryga's The Ballad of a Stone-Picker. Anita, a Scandinavian teacher in a northern fishing village, "burned all the textbooks in her school and was teaching the children about a world where there was no more war" (p. 29).

Gabrielle Roy stresses that the teacher has a tremendous potential influence, for evil as well as for good, over the minds of her students. Christine, the young teacher in Street of Riches, is awed by the power she has over the developing minds of her young





pupils: "In their eyes fixed upon mine there was complete trust. I presume they would have believed me had I told them that the world was peopled with enemies, that they would have to cherish hatred for many men, even for whole peoples. . . ." (p. 157).

Several of Frederick Philip Grove's fictional teachers question prevailing attitudes toward education. John Crawford, in The Yoke of Life, who became a teacher because he "hungered and thirsted after a higher and truer idea of life" (p. 45), criticizes a content-centered concept of education: ". . . as the world wags, we've got to cram information into the children's heads instead of making men and women of them" (p. 31). To Crawford, the influence a teacher has on the lives of his students is far more important than information imparted. Another Grove character, Woodrow Ormond in Our Daily Bread, who leaves public school teaching to become a university professor and politician, questions the value of formal schooling. According to Ormond, education is "a widening of human horizons and sympathies-- which . . . could be arrived at more expeditiously by the hard knocks of life than by formal schooling" (p. 265).

The philosophic school principal James Digby in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind also questions the value of formal education. Even while he is speaking conventional pedagogical clichés, he can not quell an inner voice which contradicts what he is saying. In the following excerpt he is attempting to counsel six-year-old Brian O'Connal, who on his first day of school shoots his teacher Miss MacDonald with a water pistol when she attempts to make him stay in his desk.



"We're only trying to-- to--" What were they trying to do? He'd talked it over enough with Hislop when he'd been here. Each year a new crop. Teach them to line up six times a day, regulate their lives with bells, trim off the uncomfortable habits, the unsocial ones--or was it simply the ones that interfered with . . . ? "We . . . want to help you. You want people to like you, don't you?"

He could see the gentle swell and ebb of the boy's chest under his sweater, that and nothing more.

"You want to get along with people. You want to grow up to be . . ." An individual whose every emotion, wish, action, was the resultant of two forces: what he felt and truly wanted, what he thought he should feel and ought to want. Give him the faiths that belonged to all other men.

His mind shied from his thinking like a horse from too high a jump. (p. 73)

In Who Has Seen the Wind Mitchell uses symbols of the school which reflect the Wordsworthian view that "Shades of the prisonhouse begin to close/Upon the growing boy" ("Intimations of Immortality," ll. 68-69). For example, at the end of the previously quoted scene, after Brian leaves the principal's office, "on the half-opened window behind [Digby] a fly, lulled to languor by the morning sun, bunted crazily up the pane, fell protestingly, and lay half-paralyzed on the sill, the numbness of his sound lost in the emptiness of the office" (p. 75). Similarly, an owl in a cage is symbolic of the Young Ben, child of nature, trapped in school. After observing the owl in the cage, Digby is moved to release the Young Ben from school despite compulsory attendance laws.

Another Wordsworthian educational concept is expressed by Armand Dubreuil in Gabrielle Roy's Where Nests the Water Hen: "I don't believe in forcing children too much. Nature, you understand, is still the best teacher. Nature teaches us more than all the books" (p. 69). Whether this romantic view is really Dubreuil's true



philosophy of education is doubtful, but it does provide him with an excuse to shirk his duties in order to go hunting. The teacher is a lovable, but unprincipled rascal. He accepts the school in the isolated district because it provides him with a pleasant summer holiday; he spreads carnage among the wild fowl out of season; and he leaves the district at the end of August although he is committed to teach until October. However, when Monsieur Dubreuil deigns to turn to his professional duties, he proves to be an exceptionally fine teacher:

. . . at the beginning of August it began to rain, and Armand Dubreuil, unable to indulge his favourite pastime, had to fall back on his schoolwork. He began abruptly to be almost as zealous in its behalf as he had been about hunting. Everyone then could see what precious things he had denied his pupils by his earlier neglect of duty. Invariably he translated arithmetic problems into terms of sheep, and thus every calculation became a matter of immediate interest to all of them, and they all laboured at its solution. He asked Luzina for a great variety of disparate objects: a perfectly spherical tomato, another smaller tomato, clothespins, and thread; then with the help of these things, he showed that the earth was round, that it revolved on its axis wrapped in its threads of latitude and longitude and in the effulgence from the other tomato, which also revolved and was the sun . . . . He was a good teacher--even an excellent teacher. (pp. 71-72)

Gabrielle Roy describes the teaching performance of all three teachers who come to the Water Hen School District. By so doing she illustrates how the work of each new teacher coming into a school is affected by the efforts of his predecessors. The first teacher, beautiful Mademoiselle Côté, establishes immediate rapport with her pupils. "Seemingly she knew how to get anything she wanted out of them" (p. 54). "How could the children disagree with a woman who





described their true nature, their goodness of character, and whose keen insight located them at that high level of perfection she herself required of them!" (p. 55). She imbues her pupils with a love of their French-Canadian heritage and a keen desire to continue learning.

The second teacher, the Victorian spinster Miss O'Rorke, provides a sharp contrast with Mademoiselle Côté. She considers that "these likeable and kindly Tousignants were, of all the people she had ever undertaken to rescue from ignorance, the most stiff-necked" (p. 61).

Every morning there were protestations and tears. The children did not want to go to school. Miss O'Rorke the whole day long addressed them with patriotic speeches which they did not understand, and she was incensed because they had not grasped her comments. . . . "The government is English, the province is English," Miss O'Rorke tirelessly explained; "you should conform to the majority and the general will." Two or three of the pupils tried to run away from school every morning. (pp. 61-62)

The third and last teacher to come to the Island is Armand Dubreuil. He proves to be an exploiter of the natural wealth of the region, but also the most successful culture bearer of all. One wonders whether Gabrielle Roy consciously intended to depict a microcosm of Canadian history through the three teachers who come in turn to the isolated little island in Northern Manitoba.

While a few novelists who themselves have been teachers, such as Gabrielle Roy, Vera Lysenko, Frederick Philip Grove, and W. O. Mitchell, portray classroom scenes in considerable detail, most often fictional references to teaching techniques are rather brief. For instance, Hank MacAllister in Grace Campbell's Fresh Winds Blowing



is never seen in a formal teaching role, but he reveals one of his teaching strategies--asking open-ended questions--in a discussion with a group of his former students. "That was Hank all over, throwing out an academic something and teasing them with it, till they got their mental teeth into it and worried it and made something of it" (p. 22).

Brief reference to the way two fictional teachers solve potential discipline problems is made in Nellie McClung's Purple Springs and Barbara Villy Cormack's Local Rag. Pearl Watson in Purple Springs recalls an incident in her childhood when she was teased because her mother was a washer-woman and her father a section hand. When Mr. Donald, the teacher, found out about the teasing, he "made this the topic for a lesson that afternoon in showing how all work is necessary and all honourable" (p. 71), and composed a new grace whereby the children thanked their fellow-workers as well as the Creator for what they were about to receive. Millie Peters, a former teacher in Cormack's Local Rag, recalls how she used to reconcile pupils who had disagreements: "Nothing like building something together to heal a feud . . . . Take a couple of scrappers and get them working on a sand pile project or something and you have peace in no time" (p. 226). It is interesting to note that both of these brief insights into classroom practice are provided by novelists with teaching experience.

No consideration of teaching methodology as revealed in prairie fiction would be complete without reference to William Greenglow. Greenglow, the mentor of the immortal "Sweet Songstress of



Saskatchewan" in Paul Hiebert's Sarah Binks, receives a permit to teach at Willows, Saskatchewan after failing a university course in geology. "William Greenglow's educational policy was to teach his class geology and at the same time have them teach it to him" (p. 63). Unfortunately, however, he has only one geology text and feeling "that his first duty was to his class" (p. 64) he has his pupils study it while he focuses his attention on Mathilda, one of the older girls in the class.

In this respect he must be considered a true educator if not a great one, for he had the educator's peculiar genius for imparting knowledge without himself assimilating it. Few teachers in the history of education in Saskatchewan have excelled him in this respect. Information flowed from him, to use the apt phrasing of Jacob Binks, "like beer from a spigot", and like a spigot he could turn it off at four o'clock without permitting any inertial flow to carry him beyond his duties. It is true that he frequently kept Mathilda after school, but this, as he explained to the school board, was because he was "not satisfied with her progress," and could hardly be regarded as violating the wishes of the school board against the too zealous enthusiasm for mere book learning. (p. 63)

William Greenglow is an advocate of having students take field trips. He has the Junior Division of his class go "out on practical work, classifying the field boulders into big ones, little ones and in between ones, thereby earning units and credits" (p. 64). Greenglow's outstanding success as a Saskatchewan educator can be attributed to his "happy combination of geological and pedagogical methods" (p. 64). In one of his letters, he writes: "They are drilled but never bored . . . and a good time is had by all" (p. 64). Hiebert's depiction of Greenglow, as of all the other characters in Sarah Binks, is designed, of course, for comic effect and is in no way



intended to be realistic.

William Greenglow, man of science, wins fame for his influence on the poetic development of Sarah Binks in Hiebert's delightful satire. Many of the teachers depicted sympathetically by prairie novelists, however, are themselves talented in the fine arts. For example, both Lind Archer in Ostenso's Wild Geese and Julie Lacoste in Lysenko's Westerly Wind have their students paint on the first day of class. Helen Bendle in Cormack's The House is an accomplished soprano who sings at a symphony concert. Dan Root in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock writes a song, "In the Wind Blown Along," for the purpose of teaching his students four part harmony. This song becomes popular in the community. It is sung by one of his students over the radio, by the sisters of the girl he has loved at her funeral, and by the men in the beer parlour as a tribute to the young teacher on the day that he leaves the community.

A number of teachers are noteworthy because of their love of literature. "Is there anything more wonderful, more uplifting than great poetry?" Miss Hans asks in R. R. Annett's Especially Babe (p. 105). In her brief appearance in F. C. Whitehouse's Plain Folks, Miss Charlson expresses her admiration for the plays of Henrik Ibsen. Miss Hestor in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock and Miss Milne in Wiebe's First and Vital Candle are remembered by former students for their devotion to teaching Shakespeare. One of the characters in Wiebe's novel says of Miss Milne, "Gad, she was nice; and liked literature. You felt she'd of taught it even if nobody paid her" (p. 50).





Lauchlan Frazer in McCourt's Walk Through the Valley is another teacher who "really liked teaching" and "was interested in a lot of things, but mostly literature" (p. 161). On the first day of school in the fall he spends the afternoon doing what he usually does the last period on Fridays--reading to his students. One of the students, Michael Troy, says, "It was always a treat to hear Lauchlan read, even if you didn't fully understand what the words meant, for he had a fine rich voice that made you feel the meaning" (p. 162). On the particular afternoon described in the novel, Lauchlan reads some excerpts from Julius Caesar, recites "some of the poems and ballads that he dearly loved" (p. 162), and sings some ballads and some songs of Robert Burns.

Such pleasant, enjoyable afternoons at school are seldom portrayed in prairie fiction. Because conflict is a common fictional ingredient, it is to be expected that many classroom episodes in novels depict crises in discipline. In Mort Forer's The Humback, Miss Langois finds that teaching in an Indian-Metis community is a daily struggle for survival in the classroom, and yet she relishes "her meat-tasting moments of victory against the Humback challenge" (p. 186).

Last year she had finally triumphed. The district school inspector had called it "an unbelievable success." After merely two years of battle against her pupils, she had emerged last June with the victory of a "near normal rate of failure."

She had survived the stench of urine poured into the school stove; she had laughed off rumours of an illicit affair with a student; she had conquered the mid-winter cold of broken windows and stolen fuel oil; and she had extinguished one serious attempt to burn down the schoolhouse. She had lived with nights



of catcalls and peeping boys; she had confiscated real pistols, dynamite caps, kitchen knives, and obscene drawings.

Until finally, after two years, she had carved for herself a monument of village respect. She had seen and she had heard all that the Humback could show and tell.

"Like a goddam rock, that one," they said of her. "But she's sure good for the kids," they nodded. "She can sure handle them kids."

Miss Langois had learned to live with the Humback surrounding her. She had learned to look at the village and its people without anger, without pity, and without disgust. During her two years, Miss Langois had become an unconquerable teacher--a steelbound teacher--a rolling tank of a teacher. Miss Langois had learned to be deaf, dumb, and blind. (p. 186)

In Arthur Storey's Prairie Harvest, school is portrayed as a battle of wits between the teachers and the Torey boys, with all the odds set against the teachers. Part of the problem is that the boys' father, who has had no schooling himself, insists that education is not necessary. The boys become such discipline problems that the teachers actually conspire with them and their father to keep them out of school. Among other escapades the Torey boys set fire to the dry prairie grass surrounding the school, hide a dead skunk in the map case, and put twenty-two shells in the stove. The latter episode so terrifies the teacher that she leaves the district immediately. A school board member expresses little regret at the teacher's departure: "It's as well. . . . We can't have a teacher who can't keep order" (p. 122). The author of this thinly disguised autobiography has little sympathy for the school or its teachers. He states, "Perhaps it was as well that the Toreys attended as irregularly as they did, for if they learned little of



the three R's they also learned little of the extra-curricular activities behind the barn, the bush, and the outhouse" (p. 105).

Another novel in which teachers receive the major blame for discipline problems is Wilfred Eggleston's The High Plains. Both teachers in the novel are incompetent. The first, Eldon Moon, an eighteen-year-old son of a local homesteader, "did little more than 'keep school', but the parents were pleased that the discipline was satisfactory, and they had for the most part little way of knowing whether the children were making any academic progress or not" (p. 76).

The young teacher has little time, inclination, or ability to teach Eric Barnes, the only ninth grader in the one-room country school. Nevertheless, the author suggests that Eric experiences a comparatively enjoyable, if unguided, form of education under Eldon Moon:

Eldon was so busy with the primary classes that Eric could only be given a few minutes two or three times a day. It was such a relief after the keen competition, the constant surveillance, the burdensome homework, which he had come to accept as an inevitable accompaniment of school life, and he came to like it very much for a while. Eldon set him tasks which he never had time to examine, compositions which he never had time to read or mark. Moreover, Eldon had devoted his own school years principally to athletics, and Eric soon found out that in many matters his teacher was more ignorant than he was himself. Fortunately for the discipline of the school, Eric was alone in his grade, and there were no others to perceive that the teacher could not himself do many of the exercises he set in arithmetic, nor answer numerous quite legitimate questions that Eric would ask. If Eric had been inclined to be malicious, he could have made matters awkward for the teacher, but he had the wit to see that the teacher in turn could make matters very awkward for him. He accepted the situation, read omnivorously from the school library, and worked only those exercises that attracted him. (pp. 76-77)





Eric's real educational problems start when Miss Faraday, "a white-haired lady who had grown prematurely old in the classroom, succeeded Eldon Moon" (p. 78). She is a 'permit' teacher who has lost her teaching certificate, because "she either couldn't, or wouldn't, take a refresher course at Normal School" (p. 78). She is weak in mathematics and science, Eric's favorite subjects, so to avoid the embarrassing intellectual traps he sets for her, she keeps him busy on her own favorite subjects, history and grammar. He soon becomes a major discipline problem. The teacher reports to Eric's mother that "he doesn't do very well in civics, or in syntax, or in rhetoric" (p. 81), and threatens to expell him for disrupting the class.

"He's been a constant trial to me, and if something isn't done about it he'll break up the school. He's lazy, and won't do the tasks I set him, and he's always reading books when he should be working, and he gets into every kind of mischief when I'm working with the others. . . . He whispers and makes other children talk. I've had to strap him once for shooting paper pellets around. . . . I've tried everything, from keeping him in at noon, and doing long arithmetic questions, and it doesn't seem to do any good. I'm just at my wits' end, and I've got to the state where I can't even sleep properly at nights thinking about it." (p. 80)

Another 'permit' teacher described in Barbara Villy Cormack's Local Rag uses bribery (or is it a pioneering attempt at performance contracting?) to avoid discipline problems and to provide motivation. A former student recalls this teacher as being one of three teachers she had in the first grade in a one-room country school in Crossroads, Alberta in 1914.

One of them, I remember, had told us quite openly on the first day that she couldn't stand children, but that if we'd do the work she gave us and leave her



alone she'd pay us each a nickel at the end of the week! This, needless to say, was to be kept a complete secret. She used to dole out large quantities of assignments in the morning and then spend the rest of the day doing vast amounts of crochet work with a little time out once in a while for reprimands. Strangely enough, in a disciplinary sense her plan worked out fairly well--showing, I suppose, what mercenary little beasts we were. But of course we learned nothing at all. (p. 14)

Corporal punishment is an often threatened and frequently used form of discipline and motivation in classroom situations depicted in prairie fiction. For example, Miss Mill in Storey's Prairie Harvest threatens to strap James Torey if he does not learn how to spell "bone" and "rope", and Miss Faraday in Eggleston's The High Plains threatens to strap Muriel Barnes if she is caught whispering while doing her sums. James Digby, the school principal in Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, "in deference to public opinion" gives the Young Ben "interminable whippings" for truancy, although "he had known it was useless as he sweated over the ritual" (p. 82). Willard Sidley, the principal in Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God, also straps a boy for truancy, but, unlike Digby, he appears to enjoy the ritual. Rachel Cameron thinks, "Willard likes using the strap on boys. He claims he only does it as a last resort. But he's always looking for occasions" (pp. 7-8).

Margaret Laurence seems to suggest that punishment is frequently meted out to fill a psychological need of the teacher or because the teacher is psychologically maladjusted. Rachel, who suffers from the frustrations of an unfulfilled yearning for motherhood, is overly severe with James Doherty, a grade two boy whom she dotes on. She constantly overreacts to his minor breaches of discipline



and hides any signs of affection for him because she is afraid her partiality will be apparent to the other pupils. One day when she is feeling particularly irritable, without realizing what she is doing, she strikes him across the face with a ruler because he refuses to show her a paper he has been writing on. Her action is caused by an unfounded suspicion that he has been drawing a caricature of her, and she can not stand the thought that the boy whom she loves might ridicule her.

Physical punishment, however, is not the most severe disciplinary action taken by teachers described in prairie novels. A far crueler punishment is inflicted on Brian O'Connell in Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind. Miss MacDonald threatens Brian with the wrath of God for lying about washing his hands. She tells the little six-year-old, "The Lord punishes little boys who don't wash their hands and then say that they did" (p. 91). But, apparently not having complete confidence in the justice of the Supreme Being, Miss MacDonald adds a particularly excruciating punishment of her own. She has Brian stand in front of the class for a whole period, holding up his dirty hands, palm outward, "in the attitude of surrender" (p. 91). Overcome by dread and shame, as well as by the physical strain, Brian faints in class. He is also sick and beset by nightmares for several days afterwards. Brian's mother, when she finally learns what has caused her son's illness, goes to see the teacher. She touches a sensitive spot in Miss MacDonald's psyche when she asks her if she likes children. "To be a teacher-- a person should. I think it would help a lot" (p. 96). Mrs.



O'Connell causes a stricken look to come into the spinster teacher's eyes when she says with compassion, "Perhaps . . . if you were to have a child you might be a happier and a better teacher" (p. 97).

Teachers using corporal punishment are not always depicted negatively by prairie novelists. Miss Thompson in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind administers physical punishment with considerable psychological insight. Instead of strapping the hand of a pupil who throws a blackboard brush across the classroom, hitting another student on the head, she "bent him over an old desk in the cloakroom; Fat had been too indignant to cry. . . . He had been cheated. . . . The way she had done it, a person couldn't show anything--not even talk about it" (p. 140).

Another fictional teacher who wins respect through the use of corporal punishment is John Crawford in Grove's The Yoke of Life. In this novel the protagonist Len Sterner becomes involved in a fight with a classmate who belittles the teacher and questions his impartiality. Len admits he started the fight and receives the strap for fighting--the only infraction for which Mr. Crawford uses corporal punishment. As he receives the strapping Len is filled with moral exaltation. Crawford, through punishing the boy who has fought in his defence, proves his impartiality and consistency in administering discipline.

Students also show respect for a firm disciplinarian in Roderick Haig-Brown's Mounted Police Patrol. Dave Sloan does not question his teacher when he is told that he must stay in after school for not working in class. "You couldn't argue with Hard-boiled Miller





the way you could with some teachers. When Hard-boiled said something, you could tell right away that he meant it to stick. All the kids knew it and they called him Hard-boiled just because of it, not because he was fierce or mean. It was a most respectful nickname" (p. 86).

Generally, in the view of parents and schoolboards depicted in prairie fiction, "good discipline" is a highly-prized pedagogical attribute. Miss Hughes, who teaches in the Peace River country during the depression, in Christine Van der Mark's In Due Season, handles her first discipline problem in the following manner:

Mike clattered noisily to the pencil-sharpener, and on the way back, struck the head of each seated pupil in the row with the sharp point. At the confusion of outraged cries, giggles, and talk, the new teacher said nothing at all. She walked very calmly to where Mike had sat down, and catching the offender by the shoulders, gave him such a shaking that the dirty shirt was practically pulled off. He sat gasping with amazement with no ready sally on his tongue, while an awed and respectful silence fell over the whole room. (p. 66)

Miss Hughes' action in this incident wins the approval of both her pupils and the parents in the community. One of the students gives his opinion with a judicious air; "She's good. . . . She'll step on old Mike. We never had a woman before, but she'll do" (p. 72).

Similarly, at the next school dance one of the parents agrees that Miss Hughes' disciplinary action indicates that she is a good teacher: "Yes, yes. Mike Olenski, she tear de shirt right off. De kids tell me" (p. 78).

The community emphasis on "good discipline" in schools of the Canadian prairies is indicated by the fact that a number of



inexperienced young teachers, such as Dan Root in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock and Christine in Roy's Street of Riches, are questioned about their ability to handle the students. The chairman of the schoolboard views Dan Root's frail physique cynically and suggests, "You take a stick to them sometimes, maybe?" Dan replies, "That is not the modern way" (p. 19). Christine's landlady, on first seeing the petite young schoolmistress, exclaims, "Come, come! You're not the schoolteacher! Oh no; it's impossible! . . . Why they'll gobble you up in one mouthful!" (p. 153).

The first day of school is usually depicted as a rather traumatic experience for a young teacher. Lind Archer, the twenty-year-old teacher in Wild Geese by Martha Ostenso, views her first day at Oeland School with considerable trepidation, because "a teacher who had formerly taught at Oeland had told her of how he had actually been trampled in a stampede that had broken out among the young ruffians from beyond Latt's Slough" (p. 24). Lind finds on first facing her class that every seat is occupied, some by six-foot teenagers from other districts who have come just to see what the new teacher is like. She assures the children with a smile, "We are going to have a very nice time here" (p. 24), takes the roll, and starts them painting. While she appears to consult the opinions of the children, she herself makes the decisions. Her attractiveness and her smile win the children immediately. "Lind saw with relief that she had captivated the children. There would be no trouble" (p. 25).

Christine, in Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches, finds the



first day of school easier than she has expected because the big, tough boys she has been warned about are away harvesting. When they do appear she finds that these "discipline problems" become responsible for her most stimulating and rewarding experiences as a teacher.

Luckily they came one by one, which gave me the time to win them one by one . . . and in my heart I wonder whether these hard characters were not the more interesting. They forced me to do many difficult things, true enough; they made me mount a tightrope, and once there, they never let me down. Everything had to be absorbing--arithmetic, catechism, grammar. A school without its rebels would be boresome indeed. (p. 156)

The attitudes students express towards their teachers in prairie fiction vary widely. Negative extremes are expressed in John Marlyn's Under the Ribs of Death, George Ryga's Hungry Hills, and Nellie McClung's Painted Fires. In Marlyn's novel, Sandor Hunyadi, the son of Hungarian immigrant parents living in Winnipeg, feels more at ease with his street gang than he does at school. . . One of the comforts of being with the gang, he thinks, is that "somebody cursed your teacher for you" (p. 47). An equally negative attitude is expressed by the narrator in Ryga's The Hungry Hills: "I went to this school for one year--just long enough to pick up the alphabet and a raging hatred of the long-armed teacher, Miss Bowen, who always picked her ears with a hairpin while contemplating my punishment for coming late each morning" (p. 29). Lucy Powers, a schoolgirl in Nellie McClung's Painted Fires, relates to the other girls at a C.G.I.T. meeting that her teacher kept her in every recess for a week to work on an essay on "Concentration."





Lucy tells the girls and the church sexton, "I've had such a bad time I nearly lost my religion. Tonight I am going to ask for the prayers of the congregation for the teacher--she's so mean--that she'll either change or die or something. I'll leave that to the Lord" (pp. 44-45).

Negative attitudes toward teachers are not always the result of disciplinary actions or pedagogical inadequacies perceived by the pupils. Sometimes the pupil's opinion of his teacher is influenced greatly by the opinion of another adult in the community. In Mitchell's Jake and the Kid, the Kid's attitude toward the teacher, Miss Henschbaw, is influenced by his admiration for the hired man, Jake. "Jake and me think a lot alike. He isn't so fussy about Miss Henschbaw either. She figures because she teaches from a history book she knows it all, but she isn't as smart as Jake when it comes to wars" (p. 18). In Miss Henschbaw and Jake, the Kid has two conflicting 'teacher-figures'. Jake's teaching tends to be more attractive to the Kid because it is highly colored with wildly fictionalized personal anecdotes, but the hired man's tendency to distort history bothers Miss Henschbaw. "She's a stickler for the truth; like Jake says, she stickles worse than anybody in Crocus. When she isn't stickling, she's running Crocus. She doesn't run Jake" (p. 173). The Kid generally tends to side with Jake, the voice of experience, over Miss Henschbaw, the voice of learning: "All Miss Henschbaw knows came out of a book. Jake, he really knows" (p. 3).

Most often, however, pupils' attitudes towards teachers, as revealed in prairie fiction, are closely related to the teachers'



ability and willingness to relate warmly and sincerely at a personal level with them. And this warm, personal relationship can not be simulated. As Rachel Cameron says in Laurence's A Jest of God, "Children have built in radar to detect falseness" (p. 3).

Marjory Golding echoes this idea in Harrison's Step Softly on the Beaver, as she explains why all the school children like their principal, Matt Flanagan. "They know he's a good guy. Kids can tell a thing like that, it's instinctive with them. They all love Matt" (p. 53); " . . . he worries himself sick about every kid in the school, though he pretends he does not" (p. 77).

Miss Thompson's rapport with her pupils in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind is attributable to her "respect for individuality" (p. 140) and her "faculty for infecting them with enthusiasm in their work" (p. 140). She does not hesitate to bestow a little extra affection on the motherless Chinese children in her classroom, and she is willing to exert an effort in the community as well as in the school to have them treated more humanely. "The China Kids were not the only unfortunates who benefited by Miss Thompson's active sense of justice and her understanding" (p. 147). She also tries to lighten the "intolerable incarceration" of school on the Young Ben by having him sit with the grade fours rather than with the grade twos, and by making no official reports of his frequent "flights of freedom" (p. 147):

She sought to ease the boy's tension by assigning him numerous tasks; she asked the Young Ben to post letters for her; if she wanted a window opened, she let the Young Ben do it. Almost daily he took messages down to Mr. Briggs in the basement. Mr. Digby noted all



this; he blessed the chance that had sent Miss Thompson to his school. (p. 147)

Rachel Cameron in Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God would like to allow herself to become emotionally attached to her pupils, but she is afraid of being hurt when they reject her feelings or when they pass out of her life. One of the things Rachel, who claims to like teaching, finds dissatisfying about her job is the tenuousness of the personal relationships with her pupils. She tells Nick Kazlick, a high school teacher:

"Maybe it doesn't affect you. Your classes are older, and when they move on, they soon move right away and you don't see them any more. But mine are only seven, and I see them around for years after they've left me, but I don't have anything to do with them. There's nothing lasting. They move on, and that's that. It's such a brief thing. I know them only for a year, and then I see them changing but I don't know them any more." (pp. 107-108)

There are, however, a number of teachers in prairie fiction who do have a lasting influence on the lives of their students. There are also numerous references to students having a positive attitude toward their teachers. The narrator of Cormack's Local Rag says in reference to the popular and charming Miss Hughes, "We children had been devoted to her from the beginning" (p. 13). Dan Root in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock "gradually had won a grudging respect, even a secret liking" from his thirty-six pupils (p. 23). Michael Troy likes Lauchlan Frazer in McCourt's Walk Through the Valley and Len Sterner worships John Crawford in Grove's The Yoke of Life. Lilli Landash in Lysenko's Yellow Boots has tears of gratitude in her eyes because she has been "fortunate enough to



encounter such a man" in her lifetime, as her teacher Ian MacTavish (p. 199). But certainly the most touching expression of affection for a teacher is referred to in Sinclair Ross's The Well, where a twelve-year-old boy names his dog after the teacher, Mr. Norris. Surely no greater love for a teacher has a boy than that he should name his dog after him.





## CHAPTER IV

### THE TEACHER AS MENTOR

A common theme running through many Canadian prairie novels is that of the young person growing up on the prairies and trying to come to terms with his culture and environment. In many cases, the young person is portrayed as having exceptional intellectual or artistic talent which has difficulty flourishing under the harsh and barren cultural environment. In novels of this kind the sensitive young individual often finds a mentor who is influential in helping him come to grips with his problems, in defining the issues involved, or in precipitating an internal conflict by showing an alternative to life on the soil. This wise and faithful advisor or counselor is often, though not always, a schoolteacher.

The most fully developed exploration in prairie fiction of the relationship between a mentor and his young protégé is Frederick Philip Grove's novel The Yoke of Life. E. L. Myles suggests that the young protagonist, Len Sterner, struggling for an education against the adversity of pioneer life, is a fictional representation of Grove himself.<sup>1</sup> In his autobiography, In Search of Myself, Grove expresses his youthful ambition: "I wanted to know all, to grasp all that man has ever found out" (p. 159). Similarly, young

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<sup>1</sup>E. L. Myles, "The Self as Theme in Grove's Novels" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Alberta, 1965), p. 36.



Len Sterner in The Yoke of Life, having no idea how comprehensive his goal is, resolves "to master all human knowledge in all its branches" (p. 33). Myles argues convincingly that there is much of the young Grove in Len Sterner.<sup>2</sup> However, there is also much of Grove in John Adams Crawford, the brilliant old schoolteacher, who teaches in a pioneer district in the same area of Northern Manitoba in which Grove himself taught. The integration of aspects of the author's own experience and personality in these two characters makes their relationship particularly fascinating, subtle, and complex.

Although Crawford has been a high school principal and "at one time, years ago . . . might have had almost any kind of preferment in academic work, as a university teacher of biology" (p. 236), he chooses to teach in a one-room country school in order to nurture the genius he recognizes in Len Sterner. "Len knew with that certainty which comes only from revelation or intuition that this teacher had consented to take this school for his sake alone" (p. 33). This realization causes Len to worship Crawford, who instills in Len his own reverence for learning. Mr. Crawford explains to Len why he became a teacher: "I hungered and thirsted after a higher and truer idea of life. That hunger and thirst itself is happiness, Len. We shall never find truth. But we must strive after it without standing still. You have the spark. I wish I could fan it into a flame" (pp. 45-46).

The boy receives these words in a state of reverent awe and

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<sup>2</sup>Myles, p. 46.



exultation. "Len was in the presence of revelation; and what was revealed to him was the majesty of self" (p. 46). The poor farm boy views Crawford as a high priest presiding at the altar of education, anointed with the power to initiate him into the mysteries of learning which lead toward the ideal. Grove builds this high priest-novitiate relationship through the use of religious imagery. On one occasion, after visiting the teacher at his cottage, Len is described as being

. . . in a strange state of mind, resembling that in which a believer of the Catholic Church may be after having confessed and received a plenary indulgence from the vicar of God. Never before had he felt with the same convincing force that this man loved him. . . . Great and glorious, life stretched out before him: far away, dimly seen, on its horizon, stood a goal. That goal was greatness. (p. 81)

On another occasion Len reads and rereads a letter which he has received from Crawford, and "it gave him a feeling of strange exhilaration; as if he must step before some altar and offer vows to the All-Highest" (p. 132).

Through instilling in Len the ambition of greatness and striving to help him fulfill it, Crawford is attempting to satisfy not only Len's needs but also his own. He advises Len that "what a man does to make a living matters little. It matters much what his influence in life is" (p. 45). He also tells a friend about the dream he cherished as a boy in Ontario: "My own ambition was no less than one day to leave the impress of my mind upon the age" (p. 42). Now, in his old age, the idealistic and dedicated Crawford still hopes to achieve these goals through Len Sterner, a boy





"destined for the highest things if given a chance" (p. 53).

Grove leaves little doubt about Len's intellectual ability. The boy has had no formal schooling before the age of fourteen, and only one year of schooling, under five different teachers, prior to Mr. Crawford's arrival in the district. Yet after less than two years of study under Mr. Crawford's guidance, Len ranks first in the province on his Entrance examinations. However, the demands of a harsh environment, a physical condition weakened by an inherited predisposition towards tuberculosis, and a flaw in his own idealistic nature, eventually prove too much for Len's academic aspirations. In the second half of the novel, he "becomes a symbol--of the ascetic spirit in a fleshly world."<sup>3</sup> His burning desire for learning becomes merged with an equally strong desire for the love of Lydia Hausmann-- a love which he feels is necessary to complete his nature. Len is shattered to find that the pure, ideal Lydia of his imagination does not coincide with the Lydia of the real world. "Love and learning: two things he had valued; but the disaster in which the former was shattered destroyed the value of the latter as well" (p. 197).

Len does go to the city and make some progress in becoming educated through individual study, although he encounters problems in acquiring "official standing" similar to Grove's own problems as reported in In Search of Myself. However, obsessed with thoughts of Lydia and suffering from delusions brought on by repeated bouts of

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<sup>3</sup> Edward A. McCourt, The Canadian West in Fiction (rev. ed.; Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1970), p. 65.



illness, Len is soon forced to abandon his pursuit of educational goals:

. . . his preoccupation with Lydia was complete and, so he felt, fatal. He must redeem himself of what he now called the curse of sex. . . . Education must come at an earlier or later stage. Adolescence had interfered with its elementary phases: it had been wrecked on the turbid waters of the awakened instincts of sex. (p. 275)

Near the tragic ending of the book, Len, now reunited with a chastened Lydia, interrupts their journey by water through the wilderness toward death in order to seek the advice of his mentor. He finds Crawford so old and senile that he cannot even talk over his problem with him. Inadvertently, however, Crawford does give Len direction. In his ramblings the old teacher says that the wilderness is the only place where all men are free. Thinking of these words, Len carries on with the journey, in which, by mutual consent, he and Lydia choose to die together rather than have the spectre of the past destroy the ideal quality of the relationship they have found.

The reader analyzing the mentor-protégé relationship in this novel is left wondering about the extent to which Crawford's influence over Len contributes to the tragic ending. Is it Len's basic nature or Crawford's influence that spurs Len on to an idealistic vision that can not be realized in the imperfect world of reality? Is it Crawford's influence that exalts in Len the concepts of mind and spirit to such heights that he faces with horror the fact that man is a creature responsive to bodily lust? Crawford has told Len that the greatest men are those who "explore the human heart and mind and help other men to understand themselves" (p. 7).



Whether Crawford succeeds in helping Len to understand himself is doubtful. It is perhaps significant though that even as Len contemplates death, he feels "he owed it to the man who lived in that cottage not to depart without a word of farewell. That man had first planted hope in his life" (p. 319).

In several prairie novels a teacher fulfills the role of mentor for a young person whom he is not directly responsible to teach. In both Ostenso's Wild Geese and Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many, a young teacher serves as a model and gives a young person in an isolated rural community a glimpse of the outside world. In Wild Geese, the lovely young teacher, Lind Archer, has a disrupting effect on Caleb Gare's tyrannical rule over his family by making his sensually beautiful seventeen-year-old daughter Judith aware of her femininity and the possibility of a better life away from the farm. "Lind Archer had come and her delicate fingers had sprung a secret lock in Jude's being. She had opened like a tight bud. There was no going back now into the darkness" (p. 53).

The young Mennonite schoolmaster, Joseph Dueck, has a similar influence on eighteen-year-old Thom Wiens in Peace Shall Destroy Many. "Since Joseph Dueck had come to teach at Wapiti School the fall before, his friendship with Thom had unlocked new thought possibilities of which Thom had formerly had no conception" (p. 17). Joseph's influence sets up in Thom an inner struggle concerning whether to question or to accept blindly "the teachings of the fathers." The teacher tells Thom to hold firmly to the good that he finds in the community's traditions, but he also counsels him,



"Don't be afraid of your mind" (p. 69).

During the course of the novel, Thom has to work out his Christian beliefs in terms of two important social issues which affect his people--World War II and "the Indian problem." Deacon Block, who rules the Mennonite community in almost as autocratic a fashion as Caleb Gare rules his family, insists that the community isolate itself from both issues. Because of an intellectual analysis of the moral issues and a sense of social commitment which extends beyond the boundaries of the Mennonite community, Joseph, and later his disciple Thom, can not accept Block's isolationist position.

A particularly crucial episode in Thom's moral struggle is the church meeting called by Deacon Block to censure the teacher, Joseph Dueck, for the sermon questioning the principle of non-resistance which he delivered in English after the school picnic. At the conclusion of the confrontation between the two men whom Thom has always admired, Joseph announces that on June 30 he will leave Wapiti to join the Restricted Medical Corps. "It seemed to Thom he struggled alone where guide-posts bearing the same legend pointed in opposite directions. Where could he go?" (p. 63). Thom is thus torn in opposite directions by these two strong men, each of whom represents a moral position for him. From this point on, Thom, who tries to analyse the problem logically, is swayed not so much by the strength of the moral position each represents, as by the moral strength of the representative. Because Deacon Block is revealed to be cruel and bigoted in relationships with his own family, the Mennonite community, and more particularly their half-breed





neighbours, the position he represents is discredited.

The usual mentor-disciple relationship, in which the disciple goes out into the world carrying his mentor's good counsel with him, is reversed in Peace Shall Destroy Many. Here the mentor goes out into the world and sends epistles back to the disciple, while the disciple tries to fill the mentor's role at home. Even after his departure Joseph Dueck serves as a model for Thom's intellectual and moral development. Most significantly, however, the teacher's influence lingers on in the community and helps to destroy Deacon Block's hold on the people he has dominated.

Unlike Joseph Dueck, Lind Archer, the teacher in Ostenso's Wild Geese, never does come into direct confrontation with the community tyrant. She does feel, however, that her coming has incited Judith to rebellion against her father, Caleb Gare. Ellen, Judith's sister, also attributes the change in Judith to the influence of the teacher. She says, "She's been that way ever since the Teacher came. As if nothing here is good enough for her anymore" (p. 38). Lind feeds Jude's dissatisfaction by giving her a vision of what she might become. Judith thinks of Lind as coming from another, finer life. Sometimes she compares herself unfavorably with Lind, at other times she finds herself "looking into the mirror for some resemblance to Lind" (p. 162). She fears that when Lind leaves, her dream of becoming part of that other, better world will also disappear.

Like Ian MacTavish, who helps Lilli Landash escape from a harsh and threatening home environment in Lysenko's Yellow Boots,



Lind Archer works quietly and surreptitiously to aid Judith. She carries messages back and forth between Judith and her lover, Sven Sandbo, advises them against taking precipitate action which might lead to violence, and eventually plans their escape from Caleb's power. Both Lind Archer and Ian MacTavish act cautiously in order to preserve their own position in the community, not only for personal reasons, but because they feel they are doing important work in bringing enlightenment to a culturally deprived area.

A relationship roughly analogous to the Lind Archer--Judith Gare relationship of Wild Geese occurs in Westerly Wild, a novel by Vera Lysenko set in southwestern Saskatchewan during the depression. Julie Lacoste, like Lind Archer, is a beautiful and sophisticated young teacher who attempts to fulfill the role of mentor to a seventeen-year-old girl. Katie Corry has the same qualities of defiance and voluptuous physical attractiveness as characterize Judith Gare. Also like Judith, Katie suffers from the tyranny of a cruel father who attempts to keep her from getting an education. However, though he physically beats his daughter and feeds the scandal which she bears defiantly in the face of a disapproving community, Sam Corry is unable to prevent her from going to school. Although the teacher recognizes the promise in Katie which has been repressed by a harsh environment, she does not fully realize why the girl suffers so much in order to come to school until the truth is brought home to her by Marcus Haugen: "She wants to study you . . . . To imitate you. After she saw you that first day and you smiled at her, she thought you might be her chance of redeeming herself. If



she behaved like you, she might overcome the contempt which the community had for her" (p. 134).

Julie's efforts to help Katie Corry are thwarted not only by the girl's unfortunate home environment, but also by the many other demands on the teacher's attention. Julie thinks,

"If I could have her as a regular pupil for even one year, it might make all the difference in her future life. What is a teacher to do, when she sees a promising pupil like Katie slipping away from her, because her environment is too much for her to handle? What are those few minutes I can give her each day? With fifty-five pupils, I have about six minutes daily with each. That's hardly enough to counteract the effects of a lifetime of abuse." (pp. 124-25)

Julie Lacoste learns that despite her best efforts a teacher is not always successful as a mentor. Katie Corry has been too long a scapegoat for the harsh sense of morality of a community embittered and frustrated by the depression. After a major community scandal in which she has been an innocent victim, Katie Corry flees the community aboard a freight train, passing out of the teacher's life for ever.

She had become, at last, what the community had long accused her of being. Yet for one last time did Julie glimpse her vulnerability, for as Katie caught sight of Julie, a spasm crossed her face and for a moment she looked as if she were going to cry, a sob was hardly heard and then immediately strangled in Katie's palm. "What is going to become of me?" Katie seemed to ask Julie as her eyes looked back at the station which she was now leaving for her uncertain destiny on the roads. (p. 143)

Julie Lacoste also attempts to play the role of mentor for Carl Solberg, the oldest boy in her class. He is one of the few people in the drought-stricken district who have not yielded to





disillusionment and despair. Rather, he has acquired a driving ambition to attain university matriculation, so that he can become a scientist, in order to, in his words, "Save this country. Save the crops. Save the people" (p. 24). The impression of Carl Solberg as Messiah is strengthened by Marcus Haugen's description of him, which resembles the Biblical description of Christ as a boy teaching in the temple (Luke II: 46-47). Haugen states that Carl is "a boy with ambition and guts and a mind--what a mind, the mind of a scientist, crystal clear! Once I heard him discuss wheat rust with a group of men twice, three times his age. In five years, what could he be ready for with the right training! The country is crying for a scientist with a mind like his" (p. 85).

Helping Carl Solberg achieve his ambition becomes one of Julie Lacoste's major goals as a teacher. She sees Carl's future as being more important than the artistic career she has given up to become a teacher. When she is told that Carl is a rare pupil who may go on to do great things, Julie responds, "That's one of the chances a teacher waits for and works for" (p. 182). She willingly accepts Carl into her overcrowded classroom even though she did not expect to have any high school students. On the first day of class, she gives him a story to read about Charles Saunders, the man who developed Marquis wheat, and she later sends away for a shipment of books for him, including a treatise on wheat by Reginald Buller. To help him financially, she pays him for cutting wood and pumping water for her. Although his parents are so poor, anti-intellectual, and demoralized by the depression that they refuse



to give him any encouragement, "Carl Solberg's future was so important to Julie that she was willing to sacrifice her own pride to win over his mother" (p. 147). When the novel ends, however, with Julie Lacoste leaving the district a few weeks before the completion of the school year, the reader is left in doubt as to whether Carl Solberg represents hope for a better life to come on the prairies, or whether he, like Katie Corry, will be overcome by the problems of an adverse environment.

In Yellow Boots, an earlier novel by Vera Lysenko, a teacher is much more clearly successful as a mentor. The central character in the novel is Lilli Landash, a young Ukrainian girl living in Northern Manitoba during the depression. The teacher, Ian MacTavish, takes a keen interest in the Boukovinian community, and particularly in the bright, musically-talented Lilli, who at the age of fourteen is an occasional student of his. To MacTavish, Lilli symbolizes the best of the beauty and music in her culture, even though as a child she was unwanted by her crude, rather brutal, completely land-obsessed father. To Lilli, MacTavish, whom she adores, symbolizes a hope for the future in a broader, more enlightened world. Not only does MacTavish give Lilli speech lessons, he endows her with his own philosophy. "Each person," said MacTavish, "has a right to live, not as someone else wills him to live, but as he himself feels within his heart that he must live. Some day your time will come" (p. 50).

Even while thinking of Lilli's future, MacTavish recognizes that it can not be divorced from the past of her people, their



culture, their attachment to the land. His struggle with the problem of what is best for the girl is recorded in part in his diary: "As for Lilli, she is so much a product of nature at its wildest that I don't know whether it would be right to encourage her to leave this environment. Would she lose her original qualities, or discover opportunities for the free development of her talents?"(p. 53).

The decision is made when Lilli rebels against her father. In exchange for some land, he attempts to force her to marry a widower who reputedly beat his pregnant wife, who subsequently died in childbirth. Faced by this grave personal problem, Lilli immediately turns to MacTavish for help with "tears. . . trembling in the corner of her eyes, tears of gratitude that in her life she had been fortunate enough to encounter such a man" (p. 198).

MacTavish, proceeding cautiously in order not to arouse the community and thus destroy his chances of further assisting progress, advises Lilli that after the age of sixteen, according to law, "a girl may lead her life as she wishes, apart from her parents' home if she supports herself" (p. 200-201). He then instructs Lilli on how she may leave the village and find employment in the city. In the city, presumably Winnipeg, Lilli obtains a job as a domestic, joins a folk-choir, and under the tutelage of a dedicated and talented music teacher becomes a gifted folk-artist. In the final scene of the book, MacTavish, now an eminent anthropologist, appears at Lilli's concert in Winnipeg and experiences both the pride and the regret that is the typical lot of a mentor whose charge has grown independent of him: "I'm anxious to see what she has become naturally . . . . But that



other Lilli was more mine. There was an intimacy between us that we could never re-establish now. When I see her, and hear her, I'll have to share her with so many others. Before she was mine--my discovery" (p. 313).

Perhaps the most well-known Canadian novel containing a prairie child as the central character is Who Has Seen the Wind by W. O. Mitchell. This novel has as its stated theme: "the struggle of a boy to understand what still defeats mature and learned men--the ultimate meaning of the cycle of life." During the course of this struggle, Brian O'Connell interacts with a number of people who contribute in one way or another to his problem or its solution. One of the greatest influences on Brian is Mr. Digby, the school principal.

The relationship between Brian and Digby begins even before the boy starts school. Digby understands small boys. He does not talk down to Brian, and evinces no surprise when the four-year-old, whom he encounters on the street, informs him that he is going to visit God (p. 7). On his first day at school Brian is sent to the principal for shooting Miss MacDonald, his teacher, with a water-pistol when she tries to force him to remain in his desk. Rather than punishing Brian, Digby attempts to reason with him. He succeeds in establishing rapport with the bright but stubborn little boy by talking to him about dogs. The principal concludes the interview with a note of firmness in his voice, however, telling Brian, "You'd better try to get along with Miss MacDonald" (p. 75). He then returns Brian's water-pistol. "'She'd like you to have this back,' he said, knowing that it was the farthest thing from Miss MacDonald's desires" (p. 75).





As the boy grows older, he begins to share an intuitive type of relationship with Digby. "Why did his insides slip a notch whenever he saw Mr. Digby? thought Brian. He didn't act like a principal" (p. 291). One day they happen to meet in front of a caged owl at the Ben's farm. Together they watch the great wild bird confined in a chicken coop. "Digby turned, and as Brian looked up he saw an expression that told him the schoolmaster must be experiencing the same feeling he'd had himself upon first seeing the owl" (p. 256).

At the end of the novel, Brian tries to analyze the feeling he has during his flashes of insight into "the ultimate meaning of the cycle of life": "It had something to do with dying; it had something to do with being born. Loving something and being hungry were with it too. He knew that much now. There was the prairie; there was a meadow lark, a baby pigeon, and a calf with two heads. In some haunting way the Ben was part of it. So was Mr. Digby" (p. 299). In Digby, Brian has found a kindred spirit with whom he can discuss his "Intimations of Immortality."

"You're the only one I ever talked to." He looked up to the schoolmaster. "I don't get the feeling any more. I--don't think I will--get it any more."

Digby was struck by something more than familiar in the serious eyes under the broad band of the toque with its red pom. His mind went swiftly back to the first day of school some six years ago when Brian had faced him in the office. He thought of the Young Ben, who no longer attended his school. That was it--the look upon Brian's face--the same expression that had puzzled him on the Young Ben's: maturity in spite of the formlessness of childish features, wisdom without years. "Intimations of Immortality," he thought.

"Perhaps," said Digby to Brian, "you've grown up."  
(pp. 296-97)

The relationship between Brian and Digby deepens through their



mutual interest in the Young Ben, who is in his element when close to nature, but hopeless, like a trapped animal, in school. As Brian and Digby watch the caged owl together, Brian notices "the quality of compassion that was on Digby's face; it was the one he had seen often in school, one saved for the Young Ben" (p. 256).

Although Digby has given the Young Ben "interminable whippings . . . . out of deference to the public opinion of the town" (p. 82), the principal is actually very sympathetic to the plight of the lad. Whenever possible he "sought to relieve the tension in the boy" (p. 253). He gains an understanding of the Young Ben's situation through visiting his home, and he ignores his truancy as much as possible. When the Young Ben steals a gun, the principal forestalls legal action by paying the owner for it. By doing so he incurs the wrath of the influential Mrs. Abercrombie and Reverend Powelly, who feel the Young Ben should be sent to reform school. They go so far as to give Digby the ultimatum of sending the Young Ben to an institution or resigning from his principalship. The principal is able to retain his position only through the intervention of Miss Thompson, the primary teacher, who has enough "blackmail" information on the schoolboard members to make them oust Mrs. Abercrombie instead.

Digby's championing of the Young Ben in order to allow him to remain a "prairie-child" is not typical of the role of the teacher-mentor in prairie fiction. Usually the teacher's intervention serves to draw the child away from his immediate environment. Many prairie children, however, have no desire for a mentor whose chief influence is to lead them away from the farm. Five-year-old Gander Stake in



Stead's Grain, for instance, is suitably impressed by his eighteen-year-old teacher on his first day of school. In fact, on the way home from school, he makes "a little, elusive, shy half-resolution to gather a handful of crocuses for presentation to the most beautiful of all women, Miss Evelyn Fry" (p. 38). Five years later, however, at the age of ten, he gives up school to take a man's place on the farm. "For Gander was a farmer born and bred. . . . He knew more than any of his teachers about the profession by which he was to make his livelihood, and he regarded their book-learning as non-essential and irrelevant--neither of which words he would have understood" (p. 40). In Gander's opinion, the ability to distinguish "between a Deering an' a Massey-Harris across a fifty-acre field" (p. 60) is more important than the ability to distinguish between a noun and a pronoun.

Sometimes, however, the rural boy starts out with the attitude typified by Gander Stake, then when he reaches adolescence realizes what he has missed by not having acquired an education. Such is the case of David Torey in Prairie Harvest by Arthur Storey. David's mother, concerned that her sons have been uninspired by their years at school, accepts a position on the schoolboard. She does this solely in order to get a male teacher for the district school, in the hope that he will become a mentor to her sons. However, "the appointment of a male teacher had not helped much. He visited the farm and the boys liked him, but his world of books was too distant from their environment of the land so that there was no interchange between him and the boys except on a superficial level" (p. 189). It





is not until David is entering his twenties that a non-conformist teacher named Charles comes to the district and starts David back on the road to learning. With Charles' help, David, who has gone no further than to grade three in school, claims adult privileges from the Department of Education and completes grades nine and ten in one year.

The people filling the formal role of the teacher in some prairie novels are portrayed as having less influence on a young person's developing thirst for knowledge than have certain other people in the community. In W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, for instance, it is not the philosophic school principal, James Digby, but rather the hard-working, hard-swearing farmer, Sean O'Connal, who instills in Brian O'Connal the dedication to become a soil scientist.

Young Eric Barnes, in Wilfred Eggleston's The High Plains, receives little intellectual leadership from the two teachers mentioned in the novel. One, eighteen-year-old Eldon Moon, "kept school" mainly by maintaining good order and coaching the boys in baseball, although in many matters he is more ignorant than Eric. The other, Miss Faraday, "a white-haired lady who had grown prematurely old in the classroom" (p. 78) is in constant conflict with Eric because he is not interested in her favorite subjects. The model of inspiration for Eric is an intellectually rigorous old geologist-turned-pro prospector, Sylvester Huck. The old man becomes not only a mentor to Eric but a Moses figure to his family, leading them out of the wilderness of the depression to the garden of irrigation.

Similarly, in Edward McCourt's Music at the Close, Neil Frazer's



love of literature is fostered not by Miss Piggott, his teacher, who gives him such poetry as In Memoriam and Paradise Lost, but by the alcoholic remittance man, later to become hunted murderer, Charlie Steele, who gives him Treasure Island, The Hound of the Baskervilles, Marmion, King Solomon's Mines, The Jungle Book, and Barrack-Room Ballads. After the death of Charlie Steele, who has become a romantic hero to the boy, reading loses its zest for Neil.

At school, Miss Piggott continued to preside with unimaginative inflexibility. Had she been gifted with a little more understanding, she might have helped Neil a great deal, but she dismissed him as difficult and a little bit queer. So it was natural that when Neil had completed Grade Nine, the highest that Miss Piggott taught, he was glad to throw away his battered text-books and count himself henceforth among the free. (p. 75)

At the age of twenty-one, Neil's interest in education is re-quickened by the shapely, red-headed teacher, Moira Glenn, who shares Neil's interest in Rupert Brooke. Culture becomes the holy grail which Neil pursues to prove himself worthy of Moira. With the help of an understanding United Church minister, Mr. Dawlish, Neil succeeds in completing three years of high school in one year through home study. "Logically, Neil should have consulted the High School principal, Andy Kane, who also held an M.A. degree, but he found Kane's bluff manner and loud assertive voice offensive" (p. 95-6). After passing the required entrance examinations Neil goes on to university. However, while Neil is pursuing culture for Moira's sake, his best friend, Gil Reardon, is pursuing Moira. Gil and Moira leave the district about the same time, and years later Neil learns they have been married, separated, and Moira has gone back to teaching in a



northern school. After Gil's death Moira and Neil are married. Neil wonders, however, if she married him "because she loved him, or because he provided a means of escape, however unreliable, from the drudgery of school-teaching" (p. 171).

One might be tempted to see in McCourt's rather negative portrayal of teachers and education the condescending attitude of an academic towards his "country cousins" in the public school system. But in all fairness it must be admitted that McCourt has depicted the representatives of his own profession equally harshly not only in Music at the Close but also in The Wooden Sword and Fasting Friar. In addition, McCourt has created one rather positive teacher-character, Lauchlan Frazer, in Walk Through the Valley.

In this novel the teacher takes on something of a symbolic quality for the youthful protagonist, Michael Troy. In young Michael the instincts derived from a Calvinist tradition inherited from his mother are often at odds with an imagination fostered by his father's tales of Irish literature and folklore. To Michael, the foothills of Alberta in which he dwells are closely akin to the hills and glens of his father Dermot's native Ireland. Despite admiration for his teacher's knowledge, sense of duty, and love of literature, Michael considers Lauchlan Frazer a prosaic figure after he meets Blaze Corrigan, a wanted criminal, who represents for the boy an embodiment of the world of romance. When he first sees these two men together, Michael realizes that he must make a choice between what they represent, just as his older sister Sheila must choose between them.



Sheila in the background was looking hard at Blaze and Lauchlan. Choosing between them. No, not that. She had made her choice. But Michael, watching the men closely, knew without even thinking about it that he himself had to choose. Until this minute it hadn't occurred to him that he would make a choice. But you couldn't have both Blaze and Lauchlan. They were instinctively hostile to each other, not just because of Sheila. They were every way different.

The choice was easy. Lauchlan was all right, but he was a part--an inescapable part--of everyday living. Blaze was unique. . . . You had to go to books to find his equal. Yes, the choice was easy. And Michael wondered why, in dismissing Lauchlan, he felt a deep pain inside that drove him from the house into the dusky twilight so that he could be alone for a little while. (p. 178)

The Troy family's choice of Blaze Corrigan is ill-fated and leads to Dermot's becoming involved in rum-running. The R.C.M.P. arrest Dermot and set a trap for Blaze Corrigan, which he avoids only through the intervention of Lauchlan Frazer. Because of "some unexpected stirring of ancient border blood, or perhaps pity for Sheila's anguish" (p. 194), the teacher warns Corrigan of the trap. Lauchlan's action has a profound effect on Michael.

Even Lauchlan Frazer, the prosaic plodding school-teacher was now an accessory to crime. Thinking of Lauchlan Frazer, caught now in the mesh of evil, Michael had a moment of revelation. A moment in which the knowledge came to him with stunning impact that tonight the last illusion by which he lived had been destroyed. (p. 194)

Later that night, still living by the code of high romance in order to justify himself to his son, Michael's father, Dermot Troy, is inadvertently killed by a mountie while attempting to save his partner in crime, Blaze Corrigan. Fatherless and with his boyhood illusions shattered, Michael moves toward maturity, realizing that he must live in the world of reality, the world symbolized by his teacher,





Lauchlan Frazer.

Winter Racehorse by R. J. Childerhose bears few similarities to Walk Through the Valley, but it is like McCourt's novel in that in both books a teacher symbolizes one alternative for the young protagonist. Winter Racehorse, an exposé of the brutality and exploitation in NHL and junior hockey, centers on the career of young Joe Johansson, the son of an Icelandic settler in Saskatchewan. Hans Kleiser, Joe's former high school teacher and a close friend of his father, plays a small but important role in the novel. Each time Joe sells out his intellectual potential or compromises a principle in furthering his hockey career, he either thinks about or consciously represses a thought about Hans Kleiser. At the end of the book, after winning the NHL scoring championship in his rookie year, Joe turns his back on professional hockey during the Stanley Cup play-offs when he learns that his brother Arne has been seriously injured in a hockey game in Edmonton. Both Joe and Arne decide to go back to university in the fall to pursue the academic goals instilled in them by their mentor, Hans Kleiser.

Another very recent novel in which a teacher is influential in changing the protagonist's life is Erebus by Robert Hunter. This novel differs from the other books discussed in this chapter in that it is the only one set in a large urban center, in this case present day Winnipeg. The central character in many ways typifies the "anti-establishment" youth of the 1960's era. Sitting outside the church in which his high school class is graduating, he crumbles the arts



bursary he has been granted and outlines his rather non-conformist philosophy: "I refuse to graduate, refuse to go to university, refuse to do the ritual dance. . . . This is it--the one great Holy War a man can fight in this century--to shake himself free of every lie, every myth, deception, illusion, abstraction, tradition, right down to the bones of his real self" (p. 14).

The life he chooses instead does not appear to be any more viable an alternative. His work in a slaughterhouse is hardly less attractive than the debauchery and sexual depravity in which he becomes involved. Even his attempt at self-alienation is unsuccessful as he only temporarily becomes disengaged from a circle of friends even more valueless than himself. He begins to drift into twentieth century pessimism. "I know that looking beyond yourself for salvation is futile. What I am beginning to be afraid of is that looking into yourself for salvation is equally futile. After that, there's nowhere to go" (p. 53).

An element of regeneration enters his life through escape to The Island periodically with Konrad, a teacher-friend who has opened a free school north of the city. Like the narrator, Konrad is disillusioned with Western Society, but "he can't shake his social conscience" (p. 52). Konrad is a dreamer who exerts tremendous energy towards making his dream come true through the vehicle of his "free school," which he regards as "a springboard--one of many--for the better world" (p. 64).

The narrator finds Konrad's vision merely academically interesting until the teacher is blinded because of the cause he



believes in. After this partial martyrdom of his mentor, the narrator becomes converted to social commitment. He begins to help at the free school, and makes plans to become a teacher. At the conclusion of the book he sums up the new role he has found in life.

Now I am, in practice, a teacher. It will be years yet before my night school work pays off in anything as tangible as a degree. But that doesn't matter, since the school has grown on me, and I expect I'll be there for many years to come. It amused me at first to see the change taking place. It was not surprising that I should discover a hidden love of teaching; it was really the only avenue left open to me, though I hadn't seen it before. What was surprising was that I should find myself in so short a time being able to answer questions from children. Perhaps some of Konrad's magic rubbed off. In all the time I've spent with him, it's no wonder that I've picked up so much of his attitude, even his enthusiasm. (p. 254)

One need not stress the rather obvious biblical parallels to see in this novel a contemporary statement of the power of a dedicated and visionary teacher in instilling a sense of commitment to an ideal.





## CHAPTER V

### THE TEACHER IN THE COMMUNITY

Community attitudes towards teachers are dependent to a large extent on public attitudes concerning the importance of education. A number of writers suggest that in pioneering communities education is generally not valued highly because all other activity is subordinate to the strenuous physical labour of wrestling a living from the land. For example, Wilfred Eggleston, in describing the cultural values of the frontier, states:

The hero of the frontier is the one who can contribute most to the mastery of the adverse environment, whether it be the giant who can clear more land than anyone else about, or later the politician who can get aid from the distant capital for the building and mending of roads. Book learning may be forced to take a back seat for a while. . . . Even when the first stages of pioneer life are past, and settled communities grow up with villages and towns, the figures who will be honoured and rewarded are much more likely to be the wheelwright, the miller, the stock-breeder or the merchant, than anyone dabbling in the fine arts.<sup>1</sup>

Eggleston quotes a journalistic account of the experiences of Senator Dan Riley in the early days of Alberta in order to shed light on the attitudes of prairie pioneers towards book-learning. Senator Riley is reported to have said: "I was setting out to be a rancher, and I wasn't long in finding out that a man could get a pretty bad name if he was caught reading poetry. In fact, it was

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<sup>1</sup>Wilfred Eggleston, The Frontier & Canadian Letters (Toronto: Ryerson, 1957), pp. 40-41.



just as well not to let it leak out that he could read and write."<sup>2</sup>

A number of prairie novels indicate that this anti-intellectual attitude persisted far beyond frontier days. This attitude is typified around the turn of the century by the central male character in A. R. Evans' All in a Twilight. Although he is married to a schoolteacher, Burl Zither considers school merely "an interlude that kept [his sons] from starting on their great life work as farmers" (p. 89). During the First World War, in Arthur Storey's Prairie Harvest, Henry Torey insists that education is not necessary and conspires against his wife to keep their children out of school. More than a decade later, Mrs. Torey succeeds in getting a male teacher appointed to teach in the local school in the hope that he will inspire her sons to continue their education. "The appointment of a male teacher had not helped much. He visited the farm and the boys liked him, but his world of books was too distant from their environment of the land so that there was no interchange between him and the boys except on a superficial level" (p. 189). During the 1930's, in George Ryga's The Hungry Hills, the school inspector drives through the rural Alberta district every fall to officially warn parents that they must send their children to school.

"We don't raise kids for school in these parts!" folks would shout at him.

"A kid don't need to learn t'read and write for to be able to grow potatoes and oats! Give a kid a bit of school, and he stops obeying his elders and betters. Next thing, they run off--an' who's gonna

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<sup>2</sup>Helen McCorquodale, The Lethbridge Herald, December 11, 1947, cited by Eggleston, p. 140.



take care of us when we get old?" (p. 29)

In communities where intellectual attainment is not highly prized, the status of the teacher is low. In Robert Stead's Grain, for instance, little Minnie Stake tells her older brother Gander that the teacher would consider him a dunce for not knowing the difference between a noun and a pronoun. Gander responds, "Well, I know the difference between a Deering an' a Massey-Harris across a fifty-acre field, an' I bet she don't, an' you can tell her that for me" (p. 60). Gander's father is basically in agreement with his son's attitude:

"... while I'd like for him to know the diff'rence between those words an' all that, I want him with me here on the farm, an' maybe when he's my age he can offer a roof to some o' them eddicated fellows that can't get a job in the city. 'Course, a fellow should be able to read an' figger even on the farm, or some o' them sharks'll leave him holdin' an emp'y sack at the end o' the year; but these pronouns or whatever it is, what does it matter about them?" (p. 60)

The Latchkey Kid by June Bhatia, a novel of contemporary urban life in Alberta published in 1971, indicates that Canadian society's attitudes toward education have reversed since pioneer days. Hank Stych, the youthful protagonist of the novel, states, "There's a lotta pressure from all quarters here to keep you in school. Education's just become a fashion. They tell you you can't even run an elevator unless you got Grade 12" (pp. 144-45). The increased emphasis on schooling, however, has not meant a decrease in anti-intellectualism; education has merely become a status symbol, a social screen, and a key to financial success. A product of this attitude, Hank Stych "had become desperate to finish school, so that he might acquire



financial independence, yet such was society's indoctrination, he was convinced he could not function at all without that magical Grade 12" (p. 174). While during the past two or three years there appears to be some reduction of faith in formal education, this attitude has not, as yet, been expressed in prairie fiction.

A study carried out in New London, Connecticut found that foreign-born people generally attribute higher status to teachers than do American-born people.<sup>3</sup> An analysis of Canadian prairie fiction tends to corroborate that finding. Many European immigrants depicted in Western Canadian fiction express great faith in the power of education to provide better lives for their children. "There is but one hope, one liberation for the poor. It is education," says the Icelandic preacher Sjera Bjarni in Laura Goodman Salverson's The Viking Heart (p. 111). The Shoulans, Ukrainian immigrants depicted in Storey's Prairie Harvest, "pinned their faith on education, and bent every waking minute and every hard-earned dollar to this end" (p. 100).

R. W. Campbell's A Policeman From Eton, Vera Lysenko's Yellow Boots, and Illia Kiriak's Sons of the Soil all give rather detailed accounts of teaching experiences in Ukrainian-Canadian communities on the prairies. The attitude toward education of the settlers portrayed in these novels is similar to that described by J. G. MacGregor in his historical account of the Ukrainian settlement of Alberta:

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<sup>3</sup>F. W. Terrien, "Who Thinks What about Educators," The Sociology of Education: A Sourcebook, ed. Robert R. Bell, (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1962), pp. 313-326.





Almost all of the Ukrainians who came were peasants who had either no schooling at all or at best barely enough to enable them to read. If, however, they lacked formal education, they were acutely conscious of what they had missed and as acutely determined that their children should not suffer the same deficiency. Contact with Canadians, most of whom could read and write, made the Ukrainian pioneers, conscious of their own short-comings in this respect, even more willing to make major sacrifices to bestow the blessings of education on their children.<sup>4</sup>

In all three novels describing teaching experiences in Ukrainian communities, the teachers are highly dedicated individuals of non-Ukrainian descent. At times Ian MacTavish, in Lysenko's Yellow Boots, feels he is working in a community where land is considered more important than people, but he seeks to understand both the beauty and the brutality in the cultural heritage of the people in order to help release the music within them that is repressed by the harsh demands of the soil. Like MacTavish, Mr. Goodwin in Kiriak's Sons of the Soil visits all the people in the community and strives to learn their language and customs. He is an indefatigable teacher, teaching the children during the day and the adults at night. Within a few months Goodwin becomes so highly-respected in the community that Hrehory Workun, chairman of the schoolboard, considers asking "the professor's" advice when his daughter wants to marry a non-Ukrainian. Although Hrehory's wife rules against seeking the advice of an outsider, Goodwin does become an accepted member of the wedding party. There is sincere regret in the community when Goodwin leaves

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<sup>4</sup>J. G. MacGregor, Vilni Zemli (Free Lands): The Ukrainian Settlement of Alberta (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), p. 209.



at the end of his five-month term. Workun says, "He was like one of us . . . . He never ignored us, never cast any reflections about our lack of order or poverty, ate with us from the same bowl and did everything he could to ease our misfortunes and to make life more bearable amid the grim harshness of pioneer existence" (p. 244).

Illia Kiriak and Vera Lysenko, two Canadian novelists of Ukrainian descent, both seem to imply that the key to successful teaching in a foreign community is for the teacher to follow the model of Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford--"Gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche." However, in R. W. Campbell's A Policeman From Eton (a novel written by a British author and presumably intended primarily for British readers) a young lady from Oxford seems thrilled that she is carrying "the white-man's burden" by teaching in a pioneer Galician community in Northern Manitoba. The young teacher informs the Mounted Police constable, "I'm their little mother, a sort of Czarina up here. This is only Canada in name; here I may rule, if I willed, with the power of the Romanoffs and the rod of Okrana" (pp. 230-31). She goes on to explain that at first the Galician community was against the school because of the taxes of thirty dollars per quarter section, but when they saw how the children were progressing the whole tone of the district changed: "When I came the atmosphere was almost as low as that of Little Russia. But the children have aroused the ambitions of the parents. . . . I only do my part. And it is so nice to be able to mould a fresh community to one's will" (p. 241).

Luzina Tousignant, a French-Canadian mother living in an



isolated northern Manitoba setting in Gabrielle Roy's Where Nests the Water Hen, has a high regard for education and goes to great trouble to obtain the services of a teacher for her children. However, like the older generation of Icelandic settlers in Salverson's The Viking Heart, she finds that acquiring an education leads the younger generation off the land. Luzina realizes the influence of the teacher as culture-bearer when her youngest daughter Josephine insists that she is going to leave home to be a teacher like Mademoiselle Côté. "Their first teacher . . . remained ever with them, never to be ousted, beyond criticism. She answered through the children's mouths. She won every argument. Basically it was she who had pulled Edmond away and then Charles. And now it was clear that she would have Josephine" (p. 84). This example points out the teacher's role in raising the aspirations of young people in the community and thus influencing their social mobility. By fulfilling this function the teacher is sometimes seen as a disrupter of the stability of a small community.

A horrifyingly vivid example of a community's resolve to resist change and to maintain control over the social values imparted to its children is presented in Erebus, a recent novel by Robert Hunter. In this novel a man named Konrad starts a progressive school near a village sixty miles north of Winnipeg. The villagers are enthusiastic about the school until they find that it is a private one and that the children to be taught in it are not their children but children from the city who can afford to pay tuition. The principal of the village school, "a firm disciplinarian," vigorously opposes progressive





schools "where kids run wild and do whatever they feel like" (p. 240). The community is concerned about the effect the free school will have on the social norms and moral values of their children. The relationship between the progressive school and the villagers deteriorates rapidly. The villagers mobilize community forces against the school. Claiming the school is "a breeding ground for atheists and agnostics" the woman's committee of the church organizes a petition which the Department of Education turns down. The town smoulders and a series of incidents breaks out between students of the two schools. Konrad, the principal of the progressive school, who loses no opportunity to try to convince others about his views on education, at the height of the animosity towards his school, gets embroiled in a heated argument in the beer parlour with a group of villagers who have been drinking heavily. He is taken outside, beaten, and blinded. Although the incident is highly melodramatic, it does illustrate that conflict can arise when a teacher, an outsider, attempts to ignore the values of the community and institute a change which departs radically from the social norms of the community.

While the above portrayal of the teacher in the community is certainly not typical of Western Canadian novels, it is typical in that it portrays the teacher as an outsider in the community. This role, however, is not unique to Canadian teachers. On the basis of her investigation of the teacher in American literature, Fanny Ames concludes that in the United States teachers are set apart from the community:



They seem to be in fiction, as in real life, in the community, but not of it. There is nothing to suggest that they dwell apart because of a feeling of superiority on their part, or because anyone else regards them as superior. They are not regarded as permanent, but as birds of passage. In small communities, with which much of our fiction deals, they are often looked upon with a jealous eye as a prey for gossip and criticism.<sup>5</sup>

This description of the teacher in American literature as an outsider is valid for a large number of the teachers portrayed in Canadian prairie fiction. The teacher's difficulty in finding a sense of place is clearly expressed by the narrator in George Ryga's The Ballad of a Stone-Picker, who tells visitors to his farm:

On a clear day I would take you up Windy Hill.  
From there you can see five miles in every  
direction. You would see all there is to see in  
one day of our countryside. Tomorrow you would  
be gone and it would be enough. . . . You  
would go away knowing everything a school  
teacher or a salesman knows about any place  
in Canada. (pp. 5-6)

A survey of Canadian prairie fiction reveals a number of reasons for teachers being regarded as outsiders in the community. First, the teacher is often an outsider in terms of being from a different part of the country or from a different country. About a fifth of the teachers in the novels studied are from the United States, Great Britain, or Eastern Canada. Even when the teacher is Canadian-born, he may find himself teaching in a foreign cultural milieu because of the many unassimilated ethnic pockets in Western Canada. Examples of this are Miss O'Rorke teaching in a French-Canadian community in

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<sup>5</sup>Fanny O. Ames, "The Teacher in American Literature" (unpublished Master's thesis, Stanford University, 1930), p. 280.



Where Nests the Water Hen, Ian MacTavish in a Ukrainian community in Yellow Boots, Razia Tantamount in a Mennonite community in Peace Shall Destroy Many, and Miss Glover in a predominantly Indian community in Tanya.

Not being aware of social customs and expectations can make a teacher feel isolated when going into an unfamiliar community. For instance, in Salverson's The Viking Heart, a novel set in an Icelandic community in Manitoba, Miss Wake, an English teacher, "dreaded going down to this foreign district, expecting to be swamped in garlic and stuffed with fish" (p. 137). She soon finds that her worries are unfounded, which "may have been a relief and again it may have been a disappointment, for the most of humanity dislike above all else to have their prejudices dispelled, especially where they concern another race. It has a disagreeable way of diminishing one's esteemed superiority and that is not a pleasant thing" (p. 137).

Writers imply that if a teacher feels a sense of superiority because of educational advantages or ethnic differences, she may effectively be cutting herself off from close ties with the community. Miss Glover in Tanya by Kristofferson "considered herself just a little above the people of Pelican" (p. 41). When asked how she liked the community, she responded, "Oh, it's all right, I guess. The place is picturesque enough, but it is lonely for a white girl to have nothing but Indians to associate with" (p. 41).

Even when no ethnic differences separate teacher and community, socio-economic differences may. For instance, in Barbara V. Cormack's Local Rag, Millie Thomas, a young city girl who comes to teach in the



village of Crossroads in 1932, is considered by some people in the community to think herself better than the local residents because she has been born and brought up in the city. Julie Lacoste, in Vera Lysenko's Westerly Wild, also finds that socio-economic differences separate her inalterably from the people she serves in a drought-stricken district of Saskatchewan during the depression. She is financially able to escape from the environment, but "for them, life in the Dust Bowl was inevitable, inescapable" (p. 46).

Novelists seem to indicate that if a teacher wants to be considered part of a community, she must share the risks and hardships of that community. Resentment is expressed against Miss Langois in Forer's The Humback because she closes the school and is believed to have fled the Indian-Metis community when a forest fire threatens: "'Goddam that teacher,' 'Toinette muttered to Marie. 'Like just when we need her she runs away. She don't have that right. She's no better than the rest of us'" (p. 207). A modern counterpart of this attitude can probably be seen in the social distance dividing teacher and community when middle class teachers work in inner-city schools.

Teachers may become alienated from the communities in which they serve if they are suspected of having condescending attitudes or affectations. Community resentment may be aroused inadvertently by factors over which teachers have little control.

In Golden is the Wheat by Eva E. Moses, Miss Johnson is considered "awful prim and proper. . . with her clipped, fast talking," by an American immigrant (p. 32); while in G. Herbert Sallans' Little Man, Harold Henderson, a teacher from Kentucky, is scoffed at by the





Canadian schoolboys because he talks "law-de-daw" and does not sound his R's like everybody else does (p. 54). In Christine Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock, Dan Root, the new school teacher, during his first hour in town, is told, "Jees! Talk English can't you," by the local hotel keeper after Dan inadvertently speaks more formally than the community norm (p. 10).

Another reason for teachers having difficulty in overcoming community barriers is the typical brief tenure of teachers in each school district. The narrator in Cormack's Local Rag, for example, reports having had three different teachers in the year she was in grade one (p. 13). There were a number of reasons for the high mobility of teachers in earlier days in the West, some of which are still valid in today's situation. The length of training was not long and educated people were at a premium. Teaching, therefore, was frequently chosen by people who did not intend to make it their life's work. Some young female teachers, like Miss Mill in Arthur Storey's Prairie Harvest, regarded a teaching certificate as "an admission ticket to a community in which there might be an eligible male" (p. 104). The landlady in Ethel Grayson's Willow Smoke is passing on a fairly accurate observation when she teases Ruth Elder that the single-life of a prairie school-teacher is only three years (p. 109).

Marriage is not the only reason for teachers' relatively short tenure in the profession. Many of the fictional teachers apparently agree with Brenton that teaching is "an ideal way-stop on the upward



mobility run."<sup>6</sup> Some teachers, such as Ruth Elder (Willow Smoke) and Gershom Binks (The Prairie Child), are teaching in order to work their way through university; Woodrow Ormond and Margaret Elliott (Our Daily Bread) go on from public school teaching to university teaching positions; Ian MacTavish (Yellow Boots) becomes "an eminent anthropologist" on the basis of studies he made of the Boukovinian community while teaching at Prairie Dawn; and Fred Sately (Our Daily Bread) and Fred Thompson (For a Better Tomorrow) leave teaching in order to go into business. John Crawford (The Yoke of Life) advises his pupil Len Sterner to consider teaching. He informs Len that there are few doctors, lawyers, and ministers who were not teachers at one time in their lives, and suggests that Len could teach for a time and then move on to a position of greater satisfaction.

Even those teachers, such as Dan Root (Honey in the Rock) and Armand Dubreuil (Where Nests the Water Hen), who win a measure of acceptance in the community, typically have to turn their back on the community in order to progress in their profession. Root returns to university and Dubreuil leaves to accept a principalship in a larger center.

The necessity of having to use horizontal mobility in order to achieve vertical mobility militates against a teacher staying long in one place. Two examples, one from the end of the nineteenth century, the other from the present time, illustrate how little this pattern

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<sup>6</sup>Myron Brenton, What's Happened to Teacher? (New York: Coward, McCann, 1970), p. 45.



has changed. During the 1880's in A. R. Evans' All in a Twilight, Emma Anderson, upon leaving teaching to marry a farmer, looks back on the plans she had for a career: "She had approached the great business of teaching seriously as a life profession. She had accepted the first school that offered. What if it was a village school? She would gain experience and in a year or two try for a large town school and eventually work her way to a city" (p. 4).

Aurora by Lorenz Neufeld, published in 1968, is a book which the author calls a "true novel". It describes the career of the central character, a teacher named David, as he moves from a two-teacher rural school in Northern Manitoba, to an elementary urban school in a small prairie city, to a three-teacher high school in a village, to a position as biological science teacher in a large junior high school in a wealthy suburb of a large city, and finally to a position as guidance counsellor in a smaller center. An analysis of this teacher's pattern of mobility reveals three factors in the status of respective teaching positions: (1) the size of the community, (2) the age of the students taught, and (3) the degree of specialization.

Several writers suggest, however, that short tenure is not always a function of the teacher's desire to move. Canadian communities traditionally are reluctant to allow the teacher to put down roots and be accepted as a permanent member of the community. An example of this fact is the case of Mr. Blaine in Grove's Fruits of the Earth, who proves to be an excellent teacher for Spalding School District: "Nobody denied any longer that the children were making progress; the inspector's reports were brilliant. Yet when Blaine had





filed on the school quarter, murmurs had been renewed. Did he presume himself so secure of tenure? Was he counting on remaining for the rest of his days?" (p. 82).

That the teacher in the Canadian West ought not to presume to be too secure of tenure is clearly illustrated by the case of Miss Henschbaw in W. O. Mitchell's Jake and the Kid. Miss Henschbaw has taught at Rabbit Hill School for twenty years; however, Mr. Rickey, the autocratic chairman of the school-board, wants to fire her at Christmas in order to give the job to his daughter. Local support is mustered for Miss Henschbaw, and in a dramatic confrontation with Rickey, after a particularly uproarious Christmas concert which delights the local ratepayers, Rickey is asked to step down as chairman of the board, and Miss Henschbaw stays on as teacher at Rabbit Hill. In this example, as in the case of Millie Thomas in Cormack's Local Rag, the teacher is the center of conflict between power factions in the community. This position can make her stay in the community short-lived, uncomfortable, or both.

Waller points out that insecurity of tenure not only makes teachers subservient and less self-assertive, it also prevents them from remaining long enough in the community to make the transition from categorical to personal contacts. He states that the teacher rarely remains long enough in any group to substitute personal for stereotyped contacts.<sup>7</sup> However, Margaret Laurence in A Jest of God, an excellent

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<sup>7</sup>Willard Waller, The Sociology of Teaching (3rd. ed.; New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), p. 61.



psychological study in fiction, illustrates that the teacher stereotype can encroach ever more firmly around a teacher even though she is teaching in the town in which she was born and has spent all her life. Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four-year-old unmarried woman, finds herself being pressed ever more firmly into her role as a teacher, and experiences increased difficulty in maintaining meaningful personal relationships with people with whom she grew up. In the following quotation she is interviewing the mother of a child who has been absent from her grade two classroom:

Why has she found it necessary to get dressed up like this? An interview with the teacher? But the teacher is Rachel Cameron, whom she's known all her life. Is it possible she doesn't think of it like this, and is edgy herself, wondering what I will say about James? I can't believe it. She was always so self-assured, a girl who never bothered about schoolwork and managed to convey the impression that those who did were laughable or else had nothing better to do. (p. 48).

Even when she is not acting in an official capacity, Rachel finds it impossible to escape from the teacher's role. Her casual conversations with townspeople fall into a meaningless pattern of banality:

They feel duty bound to address a few remarks to me, remarks which have fallen into a comfortable stability. "How's school, Rachel?" Fine, thank you. "I guess they must keep you pretty busy, all those youngsters." Yes, they certainly do. "Well, I think it's marvelous, the way you manage--I always think that anyone who's a teacher is marvelous to take on a job like that." Oh, I enjoy it. "Well, that's marvelous--don't you think so, May?" And Mother nods and says yes it certainly is marvelous and Rachel is a born teacher.

My God. How can I stand-- (p. 17)

Waller also mentions that teachers often have difficulty maintaining meaningful relationships in the adult world, because it is



difficult to remain an adult when living in a world of children.<sup>8</sup> This is a difficulty which Rachel feels creeping up on her despite her efforts to avoid it. She asks herself, "Am I beginning to talk in that simper tone, the one so many grade-school teachers pick up without realizing? At first they only talk to the children like that, but it takes root and soon they can't speak any other way to anyone" (p. 2).

The teacher's difficulty in maintaining meaningful personal relationships in the prairie community is depicted in many novels. Warren Tallman sees the teachers in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind as being among those people "whose professional standing gives them precarious half-footing in the community. . . . Because these humane persons are only half-accepted by a community which they in turn only half accept, they lead incomplete, almost inert lives."<sup>9</sup>

Typically, the teacher in prairie fiction seeks companionship with other teachers or other professionals who themselves achieve, at best, only borderline acceptance in the community. Often the teacher and the clergyman are drawn together by common interests or common loneliness. Before the Reverend Hislop is dismissed from his church in Who Has Seen the Wind, Digby, the school principal, has a friend with whom he can discuss his personal feelings about education and philosophy. After Hislop's departure, Digby's only remaining close

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<sup>8</sup>Waller, The Sociology of Teaching, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup>Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," Canadian Literature, V (Summer, 1960), 10.



friend is Milt Palmer, the unconventional "pie-eyed shoemaker", whom the social elite of the community do not regard as a fit companion for a schoolteacher. Paul Kirby, the teacher in Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House, aspires toward intellectual and artistic conversation which is rare in the prairie village of Horizon. For this reason he is drawn to Philip and Mrs. Bentley, the minister and his wife. In McTavish's For a Better Tomorrow, the teacher Fred Thompson and the United Church minister become close friends, and in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock, Philip Jobson, the preacher, suggests to Dan Root, the teacher, "The intellectuals of the district ought to get acquainted, don't you think?" (p. 65).

In Sheila MacKay Russell's The Living Earth, Agnes Miller, the teacher, and Paula Hoode, the district nurse, share a friendship which is strengthened by the fact that they are both regarded as outsiders. Paula finds it difficult to become accustomed to "the irritating awareness that every move she and Agnes made was observed, recounted and mercilessly mauled by the long tentacles of gossip" (p. 43).

In some cases, however, the teacher succeeds in being accepted into the inner-life of the community. The modest, unassuming Hans Kleiser, for example, is a close personal friend and chess opponent of a local farmer in Childerhose's Winter Racehorse. Sylvester Herrick in Evans' Dream out of Dust, one of "several old-timers who seldom gave unsought advice," and who "saw everything and said little" (p. 10) is portrayed as a permanent and respected community member.

Matt Flanagan, the school principal in Frank Harrison's Step Softly on the Beaver, is remarkably close to the Indian community in





which he teaches. Although he warns the young women on his staff not to lend money to the Indians, he himself is generous with his time and friendship. He organizes a ball team for the community and invites personal friends among the Indians to drink beer and watch hockey games on television with him. He also accompanies them on some of their hunts. Flanagan can communicate personally with his Indian friends, conversing casually in the idiom of the district about topics such as drinking, sex, and hunting, as well as education. He can also enjoy a quiet smoke with them without feeling the need for conversation. The principal is an unassuming man who values education, but does not try to impose his values or his learning on others. The nature of his relationship with the community can be seen clearly when John Fall asks him whether it would be all right for his children to miss school to go root-picking. Flanagan immediately answers, "No it isn't. You know that without askin'" (p. 83). Later in the conversation, however, he acknowledges that he knows the children will be going despite his disapproval. He tells John, "About the kids: you tell those guys, they've got to work like hell when they get back. They gotta make up this time. When do you figure on goin'?" (p. 84).

In communities where education is held in slight regard, the teacher often has to gain acceptance into the inner-life of the community through achievements far removed from his field of expertise. For example, in Neufeld's Aurora, David gains community acceptance in the lake district of Manitoba through his prowess as a hunter and athlete:



When his students and their parents had learned their new teacher excelled in sports and was an expert marksman and avid hunter, David had immediately been accepted as one of them. Too much so, perhaps, thought the young teacher. What kind of teacher was it, he wondered, whose conscience permitted him to hunt deer out of season from a moving vehicle with a spotlight at night? (p. 101)

Similarly, the boys in Sallan's Little Man would like to consider their teacher Harold Henderson effeminate because he uses talcum powder and teaches music to the girls, but "it was no satisfaction to think of him as a sissy . . . for Mr. Henderson made home runs at baseball. . . . And he had a reputation for outskating the huskiest young farmers when they played hockey on the outdoor ice in winter" (p. 54).

Other teachers such as John Crawford in Grove's The Yoke of Life, Mr. Goodwin in Kiriak's Sons of the Soil, and Ian MacTavish in Lysenko's Yellow Boots take a keen interest in the agricultural concerns of the district. MacTavish, who is an amateur agronomist, is respected in the Boukovinian community of Prairie Dawn. Anton Landash, one of the most influential settlers in the community, "had already found the teacher a shrewd man with a practical knowledge of farming and welcomed the opportunity to talk to him" (pp. 44-45).

Waller suggests that church work is one means by which a teacher can increase his prominence as a person and enlarge the following he is able to gain in a community.<sup>10</sup> The strong emphasis on teachers sharing responsibility for religious matters in many

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<sup>10</sup>Waller, The Sociology of Teaching, p. 66.



prairie communities has strong historical roots in Western Canada as the first teachers on the prairies were often clergymen or people closely associated with them. Early teachers included Methodist preachers, Roman Catholic priests and nuns, Anglican female missionaries, and young men aspiring to religious orders. All of these people served the dual function of missionaries and educators. Even when the roles became distinct, many early teachers had a strong missionary zeal and assumed responsibility for the religious life of isolated communities. An example is Isobel Davis in E. H. Oliver's Beaver Lodge. A very energetic young lady, she alarms some parents by telling their children what to eat and demanding that they brush their teeth. She also organizes a Sunday School and the community's first church service. "'And it's just fun!" laughed Isobel. 'I'm shining up their teeth and brightening their spirits.' 'And saving their souls,' added Mrs. McKellar" (p. 55).

Other teachers who demonstrate a zeal for religious work include Ruth Elder in Grayson's Willow Smoke and Fred Thompson in McTavish's For a Better Tomorrow. Ruth Elder is a convenor of a religious committee, and makes posters for community 'drives', and Fred Thompson organizes young people's groups, is active in church work, and sings in the church choir. The missionary tradition among early teachers may explain why many teachers in later years are expected to take an active part in religious activities in many communities, and why teachers and clergymen are shown in so many novels to be drawn together. Besides being alike in being expected to serve as models for the young people in the community, they may also be drawn together





because of common intellectual interests or because they are both isolates from the inner life of the community.

Even those teachers who are not particularly interested in religion are expected to take an active part in church work in some fictional communities. Dan Root, in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock, is urged by the preacher, Philip Jebson, to bring his class to church to sing a song he has written. Dan is hesitant about doing what the preacher asks. "I don't know . . . . Some of the children come from homes where the parents don't attend church. . . . You may only make these people annoyed. And they may feel that I'm interfering. It's your job to get the people to go to church, not mine" (p. 66). But under pressure from the minister he yields and agrees to leave the decision to the students. He does insist, however, that he will bring only those students to church who want to come and are sure their parents will not object.

James Digby, in Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, is also urged to become more active in church work, to be more careful about whom he associates with, and in general to "set a little better example in the community--when you're not in school" (p. 283). He is told by the local chairman of the schoolboard, "The--kids aren't educated just inside the schoolroom. We feel that their spiritual life--you should be taking more interest in the church, and we figure it wouldn't hurt if you was to take a Sunday school class each Sunday" (p. 284).

While the teacher is typically regarded as an outsider in the community, he is certainly far from being considered outside of its normative jurisdiction. In fact, the standards of public morality



demand of the teacher are stricter than those demanded of any other member of the community with the possible exception of the clergyman. Christine, a young teacher in Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches, describes crossing the village on her first morning of teaching in the community: "I think at every window someone stood to spy at me" (p. 154).

Frederick Philip Grove, in an authorial intrusion in Fruits of the Earth, expresses a rather cynical attitude toward community interference in the private and professional life of the teacher: "As elsewhere in rural districts of the west, the teacher was the most common topic of discussion. The school is the one institution over which the district has immediate and absolute control; and every ratepayer thinks himself entitled to a share in the running of it which is in inverse proportion to his qualifications" (p. 82).

One of the strongest statements of the local board's absolute control over the teacher is made by Deacon Block in Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many. From the time Razia Tantamount first comes to teach in the isolated Mennonite community of Wapiti, Block, the colony's leader, looks on her as a potentially disruptive influence in the community:

A snip of a girl: skirts almost to her knees, face whitely smiling. The way the Superintendent had written, it had appeared they were sending a sedate older teacher with fine teaching ability. Her recommendations were excellent, but--his frown deepened . . . . There had always been Mennonite teachers available before, but now the war disrupted that also . . . . A limited knowledge of the world was necessary for the children, but what would this worldly girl, fresh from training, emphasize in her teaching . . . . The need for the community had



grown to be a driving imperative to him . . . .  
 No girl would disrupt the community he had built  
 up; she could be dismissed after a month if  
 necessary." (pp. 124-25)

Nellie McClung, in her novel Purple Springs, gives an interesting account of a local schoolboard interviewing a prospective teacher during the early years of the twentieth century. Being "masters of duplicity", the board members make an unannounced call at Pearl Watson's home at eight o'clock in the morning. "They would see first would she be up? They had once had a teacher who lay in bed the whole day on Saturday. Would she have her hair combed? They were not keen on artistic effects in the school buildings, but were a unit on wanting a tastefully dressed teacher" (p. 140).

There is a strong tradition revealed through prairie fiction of the community being an exacting guardian of potentially negative moral influence which the teacher might exert on his students both in the classroom and through the example of his private life. In Cormack's Local Rag, the narrator makes a brief reference to "a young man who, I think, must have had quite a flair for his job, but he unfortunately spent too much of his time carrying on with the older girls in the school, much to the scandalization of the good wives of the village--who pretty soon sent him packing" (p. 14). Ann Foster, an attractive young teacher in Kerr's Gay Dogs and Dark Horses, scandalizes the neighbourhood by spending her Sunday afternoons at the farm of an incorrigible Irish bachelor, Maggie Magee, who is not highly approved of by the solid citizens of the community. "Having decided against further teaching, anyway, she could well enjoy the 'terrible disgrace' of her 'forced' resignation" (p. 201). Gail Anderson, a



teacher involved in a torrid romance with another Irishman in McCourt's Home is the Stranger, also feels the censure of the rural community, but she is saved from dismissal by the teacher shortage after the Second World War. "Lots of people thought I wasn't fit to teach their children. But they didn't know anything definite--just the usual gossip. And besides . . . I'm a good teacher. And good teachers are hard to get these days" (p. 221).

The female schoolteacher in a prairie community is placed in a delicate social position. She is generally expected to marry a local man, but she must be extremely careful not to arouse an easily scandalized neighbourhood. Martha Ostenso in Wild Geese states: "The school teacher above all was looked to as a model of propriety" (p. 104).

The exact nature of the expected model and the strictness with which it must be adhered to varies depending upon the nature of the community. In Christine Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock, Dan Root, who teaches in a German-Russian community predominantly of the Brethren in Christ religious denomination, is asked whether he drinks or smokes, is urged to attend church on his first day in the community, and has his Chaucer text thrown in the fire because of its "filthy" contents.

Razia Tantamount, teaching in a predominantly Mennonite district in Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many, conceals Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises and her cigarettes, and wipes off her lipstick when she hears a knock on her teacherage door. A teacher in Arthur Stringer's The Mudlark is fired for smoking in her classroom, and James Digby in Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind is just one of a number of teachers





who slip surreptitiously down to the janitor's room when they want a cigarette. Digby also drinks on the sly with his good friend Milt Palmer, the shoemaker. Dan Root, on the day he leaves the district in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock, is invited into the beer parlour, but he chooses to drink tomato juice. Only in such recent novels as Robert Hunter's Erebus (1968) and Frank Harrison's Step Softly on the Beaver (1971) do teachers drink openly in public with the local residents of the community. This appears to be one indication of a loosening of social standards in respect to accepted behavior of schoolteachers.

In several novels, communities are shown to react negatively to teachers becoming actively involved in politics. Because of her political activity, Pearl Watson in McClung's Purple Springs cannot find a boarding place in the district; and, when she goes to live with a woman whose morals are unjustly suspect, she finds that none of her pupils show up at school. In Neufeld's Aurora, David, who campaigns for the Progressive Conservative party in a Liberal community, finds that "during the six weeks of the campaign, his position at The Beach changed from one of the most popular teachers of its history to undoubtedly its most unpopular one" (p. 107).

While prairie communities are typically pictured as resentful of teachers who threaten to disrupt accepted patterns of life, they welcome teachers' efforts in service organizations. Some teachers exert considerable leadership in this type of community endeavor. Miss Hans, in R. R. Annett's Especially Babe, is an indefatigable worker for the church, the Ladies' Aid, and the Temperance Society.



She is also an active campaigner for the Red Cross. "She attended all meetings and helped organize the benefit concert that was to be the culmination of the drive for funds. She and the Sanford school principal arranged the program for the concern and included in it practically every known device for the raising of money" (p. 126).

In Jake and the Kid W. O. Mitchell gives a humorous portrayal of the efforts of Miss Henschbaw, the veteran teacher of Crocus, Saskatchewan, as an active community organizer. Her community work is climaxed during Saskatchewan's Golden Jubilee. Repeat Golightly announces, "But without Miss Henschbaw--without her--there'd be no Golden Jubilee Committee. . . . To her and her alone goes the credit--most of the credit--for the programme to mark our province's fiftieth birthday" (p. 173). Among other accomplishments, Miss Henschbaw organizes the Crocus Preservation of Historical Shrines and Historical Landmarks Society, the Golden Jubilee Mosquito Control Programme, the Golden Jubilee Benches for Old-timers Programme, the "What My Province Means to Me" oratorical contest, and the Crocus Golden Jubilee Citizen competition.

The teacher's efforts in community service work are usually welcomed and often expected. However, when the teacher attempts to undertake what he might consider to be more important work in the community, he may be doomed to failure by lack of status and lack of influential personal contacts. W. O. Mitchell vividly sums up the social position of the teacher in the community in Who Has Seen the Wind. Miss Thompson, who has just failed to achieve social justice for a starving Chinese family, is told by her friend Dr. Svarich:



"What did you expect? You don't expect to be taken seriously do you? You're only a school teacher. You're not the Mayor--the banker--a businessman; you're not the wife even of a property owner. What you should do is pick a man of weight in the town--marry him--then go to work." (p. 163)

It is not a simple matter to assess the status of the prairie schoolteacher as revealed in fiction because of the diversity of points of view and because of the difficulty in distinguishing between attitudes regarding the role incumbent and the role itself. The typical schoolboy view of the teacher's position can be represented by quotations from McCourt's Walk Through the Valley and Sallan's Little Man. Fourteen-year-old Michael Troy in Walk Through the Valley says, regarding his teacher, "Lauchlan was all right, even if he were only a schoolteacher" (p. 162). Young George Battle in Sallan's Little Man has little respect for his teacher, Harold Henderson, "a man, he figured, doing a woman's work" (pp. 52-53).

Christine's mother, in Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches, also sees teaching as a woman's occupation, but she has great respect for it. She pleads fervently with her daughter who is completing grade twelve, "If only you were willing, Christine, to become a teacher! . . . There is no finer profession, none more worthy it seems to me for a woman . . ." (p. 153).

A common sociological method of assessing the status of a particular occupation is to have respondents rank it among other jobs. When fictional characters compare other jobs with teaching, however, we must remember that their opinions of the criterion occupations may not coincide with that determined by the sociologists. For instance,





to the prairie farmer, farming may be the noblest occupation in the world. Grove's John Elliot in Our Daily Bread is offering high praise indeed when he opens his home to his daughter's suitor, the teacher Fred Sately, because "above all classes of men, even above the farmer, he respected teachers and preachers" (p. 7).

On the other hand, two teachers during the depression feel that their salary is so low and that they are so lacking in status that they cannot ask the girls they love to marry them. Dan Root, in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock, tells Fenna Leniuk, "I don't know anything else but teaching, and I'm on the lowest rung of the ladder. I make forty dollars a month, and I don't own anything but what I can carry in my two hands" (p. 106). He admits that his salary would not be too bad if he owned some land as well, but he claims, "I couldn't farm if I were starving. I'm only a teacher" (p. 106).

James Digby, in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, also assesses the status of his occupation rather negatively, as he considers whether he should ask Ruth Thompson to be his wife. His problem is compounded by the fact that his romantic rival is Peter Svarich, a doctor.

He was a teacher, a public-school teacher. He boasted no degree and could not look ahead to a possible high-school principalship. The best that could be hoped for was perhaps an inspectorship many years in the future. Actually he could offer her very little; one could hardly build up an estate on fourteen hundred a year. He could not give her even the dignity of a profession; ministers and teachers were not dignified--their work was not. A doctor, on the other hand--there was some distinction in being a doctor's wife. People looked up to such a person, but not to a schoolteacher's wife--certainly not.  
(p. 207)



Sociologists often use the average amount of money earned to determine the status of a profession. If this criterion is used, the typical teacher in prairie fiction certainly does not rank very high on the social scale. However, Christine's mother in Roy's Street of Riches scoffs at this idea. When her daughter suggests that teaching does not pay very well, she replies, "Oh! Don't talk like that. Should we value our lives by what we earn?" (p. 153).



## CHAPTER VI

### THE IMAGE OF THE TEACHER: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study has been to determine the image of the teacher as portrayed in Canadian prairie fiction published during the past half-century. The source material consists of seventy novels and single-author short-story collections which contain a total of 143 teachers as major or minor characters. Since the investigator is dependent upon the information provided by the novelist, he cannot possibly obtain the same kinds of information about each teacher. For this reason the material is seldom amenable to quantitative analysis. One can, however, perceive patterns emerge in the teacher-student and teacher-community relationships which are perhaps more meaningful than numerical data because these relationships are seen in life-like contexts, undisturbed by the presence of an investigator.

The fiction examined includes novels with settings ranging from pioneer rural to modern urban communities in the three prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Most of the novels are set in rural communities during the first half of the twentieth century, and most fictional teachers are pictured as teaching in rural or village schools. Prairie fiction, therefore, presents to a large extent a picture of rural education and community life as it no longer exists. We must remember, however, that it is out of this cultural milieu that our present educational systems evolved. Since



social expectancies develop over a long period of time, looking at attitudes of the past towards teachers can contribute to a better understanding of present expectancies concerning the role of the teacher.

In many novels, but particularly those in which a teacher plays an important part, the personal rather than the pedagogical attributes of the teacher are of central concern to the novelist. To summarize the image of the personal life of the teacher as portrayed in Canadian prairie fiction is not a simple matter. The novels included in this study contain references to 143 teachers, each of whom some author hoped to make memorable through individualization of character. Out of an analysis of this diversity of characterization, however, the following impressions emerge.

Approximately two-thirds of the fictional teachers are women. The female teacher's romantic life, or lack of it, is often the principal concern of the novelist, and is usually closely related to her success as a teacher. For these reasons romantic interest is a practical basis for classification of the personal life of female teachers. In general, the fictional teachers fall conveniently into the following six categories: romantic heroines, romantic sirens, aging rebels, old maids, aspiring academics, and married women.

The romantic heroine is typically a conventionally beautiful young woman and an exemplary teacher. She is usually an important character in a book written by a novelist with teaching experience, and is almost invariably musically or artistically talented. She is frequently a city girl whose lack of teaching experience is more than





offset by her enthusiasm, idealism, and creativity. Generally she leaves the teaching profession after marrying the most eligible bachelor in the community.

The romantic siren is an alluring young woman, usually from the city, whose standards of personal conduct are somewhat less inhibited than the rural community's norm. Her "fast" reputation may be attributable, in part, either to social expectancies different from those she is accustomed to, or loneliness in a strange and isolated community. Her role in the novel is ordinarily that of romantic competitor for the heroine. Unlike the romantic heroine, she is not the protagonist. While the teacher-siren may meet community disapproval for her personal conduct, she is usually highly respected for her teaching ability.

The middle-aged rebel is typically in her thirties and fighting desperately to avoid falling into the old maid stereotype. As the attitudes of non-teacher prairie women in Ostenso's Wild Geese, Grove's Our Daily Bread, and Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock indicate, this is not a psychological problem peculiar only to schoolteachers. Occasionally, in her desperation to find a husband, the teacher threatened with perpetual spinsterhood acquires the reputation of a siren, though she is more often a comic or pathetic figure than a dangerously alluring one. She is often neurotic, beset by fantasies, sexual frustrations, or obsessions, and is sometimes a product of a loveless childhood. Some of the more psychologically complex fictional portrayals are of teachers in this category.

The old maid is firmly entrenched in the stereotype and



teaches because she has no other choice. She is usually rigid and unimaginative in the classroom and embittered and frustrated in her personal life.

The aspiring academic teaches in public schools as a temporary measure before going on to other academic pursuits. For example, Ruth Elder in Grayson's Willow Smoke aspires to become Dean of Women in a university or Head of a Settlement House, and Margaret Elliott in Grove's Our Daily Bread becomes a university professor of English. Margaret Elliott has a number of proposals, but like Ruth Elder, she is not interested in marriage.

The married woman teacher is usually a very minor fictional character and seldom appears in novels published prior to the Second World War. Usually the married woman is pictured as returning to the classroom temporarily and under exceptional circumstances, such as a teacher shortage in the community.

The typical male teacher in prairie fiction is neither handsome nor heroic, but is usually an effective teacher even though he may be considered "a man . . . doing a woman's work" (Sallans, Little Man, p. 58). Though he may be depicted as having personal idiosyncracies, he is usually treated sympathetically by the novelist. The gallery of male teachers in prairie fiction, however, is not lacking in isolated examples of incompetents, sadists, lunatics, and homosexuals.

Romance does not play as big a part in the lives of male teachers as it does in the lives of female teachers, and the men's professional success is not as closely related to personal romantic satisfaction. Older male teachers, for example, are usually portrayed



as competent; older female teachers are usually stereotyped as frustrated and incompetent. Where the male teacher has a romantic interest, it is usually directed to a student or former student, a colleague, or a married woman who shares his cultural interests.

The personal life of the male teacher is often rather lonely. He is generally a scholarly man who can find few friends who share his interests and values. In some cases he is a product of a farm background who has alienated himself from the land by acquiring an education, and yet does not feel at home in either the country or the city.

An analysis of fictional portrayals of teachers reveals a number of traits which prairie novelists consider to be characteristic of good teachers. The good teacher is invariably depicted as a warm, responsive person who inspires confidence and enthusiasm in others. He respects the individuality of his pupils and establishes warm personal relationships with them. These relationships typically extend beyond the confines of the classroom. The effective teacher seeks to understand the cultural milieu in which he has to operate, and when teaching in a district with a different social or cultural background than his own he respects the customs and beliefs of the community. He often considers himself a culture-bearer--not in order to impose his values on the community, but rather to enrich the lives of the people. While not dogmatic about the value of formal schooling, the good teacher is dedicated to learning and devoted to his job. He is usually keenly interested in science, the fine arts, and literature, and is often accomplished in one or more of these





fields.

The ineffective teacher, on the other hand, is usually lacking in the above qualities. The greatest failing a teacher can have according to novelists such as W. O. Mitchell, Wilfred Eggleston, and Barbara Villy Cormack is not to like children. Other common failings of teachers are the lack of interest in teaching, inadequate knowledge, inflexibility, and an inflated opinion of their own importance.

Teachers depicted as successful in their profession generally employ a very flexible curriculum. In fact, there is very little evidence in any of the novels of the rather rigid provincially set curricula actually in effect in the prairie provinces at the time. On the first day of school in McCourt's Walk Through the Valley, the teacher, Lauchlan Frazer, is seen drawing up a timetable, which the author refers to as "the pattern of servitude" (p. 160). Lauchlan, however, does not follow the timetable rigidly. In fact, he spends the whole of that same afternoon reading his favorite literature to the class. In his novel, The High Plains, Wilfred Eggleston implies that Eric Barnes receives a better education from a teacher who knows little but allows the boy to read widely on his own than he does from another teacher who tries to impose her own intellectual preferences on him in order to remedy what she considers to be his academic deficiencies.

Many prairie novelists appear to favor considerable emphasis on fine arts in the curriculum. Martha Ostenso in Wild Geese, Vera Lysenko in Westerly Wild, and Barbara Villy Cormack in The House are just a few of the prairie novelists who give the fine arts a prominent



place in the programs of their fictional teachers. It is perhaps significant that all three of these novelists have had teaching experience.

Of those novelists who advocate the major tenets of progressive education in their fiction, Vera Lysenko is the principal spokesman. In Westerly Wild, Lysenko's model teacher, Julie Lacoste, constructs an integrated curriculum emphasizing the fine arts and centered on projects of immediate social interest to her students and the community. She also seeks to integrate the school with the community, and uses volunteers from the community to assist her in instruction. Agnes Miller, a professed Deweyite, in Sheila MacKay Russell's The Living Earth, is another teacher devoted to the cause of progressive education. She is engaged in a running conflict with the school inspector, who she feels is not exerting sufficient influence to further the cause in the Peace River area of Alberta. Luella Kestor, in Frank Webber's Grudge, on the other hand, is forced to resign because she does not agree with the inspector concerning the increased emphasis on art and social studies and the de-emphasis on the 3 R's which she feels is reflected in the Alberta curriculum of the early 1940's.

The only other example of an inspector's interference with the work of a teacher is found in Lorenz Neufeld's Aurora. On a surprise visit the inspector finds the teacher, who has just been playing ball with his students at recess, dressed in a windbreaker. He reprimands the young teacher named David for his inappropriate dress, for flying the Union Jack upside down, and for leaving the school



unsupervised while he eats his lunch in the teacherage. Above all he is angry because David has promoted five grade-eight students on a trial basis to grade nine after the entire class, on the inspector's recommendation, had failed the previous year. David takes great pleasure in giving the class a chance to prove their capability in oral German, a language which it soon becomes obvious the inspector does not understand. The teacher resents more than anything else the pompous attitude of the inspector:

David's anger matched his superior's and he knew he might soon throw caution to the wind and heave the man from the room if this type of interrogation continued. That this same man would make a special trip from the city to see him next spring to try and persuade him to renew his contract for the following year was a factor David would never have predicted that day. (p. 100)

The greatest failure of the school administrator, as represented by novelists, is that he frequently adopts an attitude of self-importance. In Margaret Laurence's A Jest of God, Rachel Cameron says of her principal Willard Sidley: "There is no real reason why I should dislike him, none at all. It's that pompous manner of his, I think, the way he has of seeming to insist that his slightest word has significant meaning, and if you aren't able to see it, the lack is yours" (p. 6). Another example of the pompous administrator is Mr. Pennycup in Grove's The Yoke of Life. Mr. Pennycup, who is "engaged in the administration of what is probably the largest high school in the west" (p. 237), disdains being called a teacher and is proud of having risen to a position where his personal contact with students is minimal.



The teacher in the classroom, however, is engaged intimately in personal contact with students. As might be expected because conflict is a common ingredient in fiction, teacher-student conflicts are abundant in prairie novels. Sometimes, as in Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches, a teacher suggests that her greatest source of satisfaction comes from teaching children generally regarded as discipline problems. Several other novelists who have had teaching experience, such as Nellie McClung and Barbara Villy Cormack, illustrate how teachers can avert potential discipline problems and turn them into learning experience.

Quite frequently, however, fictional teachers attempt to solve discipline problems by administering corporal punishment. While physical punishment of children is seldom condoned by novelists, most prairie communities are pictured as valuing highly a teacher's ability as a firm disciplinarian. Margaret Laurence in A Jest of God and to a lesser extent W. O. Mitchell in Who Has Seen the Wind and George Ryga in The Ballad of a Stone-Picker suggest that discipline is frequently meted out to satisfy a psychological need of the teacher rather than to help the child.

From the classroom situations depicted in prairie novels, one can conclude that many novelists see teaching as anything but an objective and rational activity. Crucial decisions are frequently made subjectively by the teacher on the basis of pedagogically irrelevant considerations or his own personal feelings. For example, Dan Root in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock agrees against his better judgement to allow his class to sing in church because he knows the





pianist will be Fenna Leniuk, the girl he loves. Similarly, James Digby in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind saves the Young Ben from going to reform school by paying for the gun the boy has stolen, because he recognizes in the Young Ben's yearning for the legally unattainable gun a reflection of his own yearning for Miss Thompson.

Pupils' attitudes toward their teachers, as depicted in prairie fiction, are generally a function of the teachers' respect for individuality, sense of justice, enthusiasm, and willingness to relate to them personally. Similarly, the teacher's satisfaction in his job appears to be directly related to the type of relationship he establishes with his students. One of the teacher's greatest joys, as revealed in numerous novels, is to establish a relationship with a child that lasts beyond the classroom situation. Above all, teachers need to feel that they have exerted a positive influence on the lives of at least a few pupils whom they have taught. Rachel Cameron's greatest frustration in teaching primary children in a graded school in A Jest of God is to see the children whom she has taught growing up to be strangers to her. Modern mass education has made use of many innovations which allow a teacher to come into contact with a large number of students briefly but none for a long enough period of time to allow a close personal relationship to develop. It seems both tragic and ironic that in the name of progress we have destroyed what many writers consider to be the greatest source of both teacher and student satisfaction found in education of the past.

In novels in which the central focus is on a young person struggling to attain maturity or to achieve a meaningful relationship



with his environment, the teacher is frequently cast in the role of mentor. The teacher in this role of personal friend and advisor is usually dedicated and sincere, but his efforts do not always end in the hoped-for results. John Crawford, in Grove's The Yoke of Life, for example, is successful in instilling an almost religious fervor for learning in his young protégé, Len Sterner. It can be argued, however, that Crawford's influence contributes to Len's excessive idealism and thus indirectly to his ultimate disillusionment and death.

The mentor often provides an example of cultural attainment and stimulates the young person in a disadvantaged environment to break away from the rural community and seek a better life in a different setting. Under these circumstances the teacher is sometimes not sure whether his influence will be positive or negative. In Vera Lysenko's Yellow Boots and Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese, the teacher helps a young person escape from parental oppression to a life of greater personal fulfillment. In a later novel by Vera Lysenko, Westerly Wild, Julie Lacoste is less successful in saving one of her pupils, Katie Corry, from the effects of an unfortunate home environment.

As a representative of a less parochial way of thinking, the teacher may act as a disruptive force in an isolated community. Such is the effect of Joseph Dueck in Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many. In this novel set in a Mennonite community in northern Saskatchewan during the Second World War, the teacher's model and influence cause the young protagonist Thom Wiens to question the



colony's official stand in respect to both war service and relations with the Indian element in the community.

In several novels, including McCourt's Walk Through the Valley and Childerhose's Winter Racehorse, the teacher as mentor symbolizes one alternative of a polarity of interests within a young person. In both of these novels the alternative represented by the teacher is not the one most immediately attractive to the youthful protagonist, but it is the one he chooses as he matures.

While the teacher as mentor is often quite influential in prairie fiction, in Eggleston's The High Plains, Storey's Prairie Harvest, and McCourt's Music at the Close the authors clearly imply that their young heroes need intellectual guidance and stimulation which their teachers are unable or unwilling to give them. Other young protagonists, such as Gander Stake in Robert Stead's Grain and Sandor Hunyadi in John Marlyn's Under the Ribs of Death, have no desire for a teacher's guidance.

Even when the young person has intellectual aspirations, however, the teacher may not always be his principal motivator. In three novels of the depression, Eggleston's The High Plains, Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, and Lysenko's Westerly Wild, an intelligent boy has a strong desire to become a soil scientist in order to save the drought-stricken prairie and its inhabitants. In The High Plains, Eric Barnes receives little inspiration from his teachers--his true mentor is an old geologist, Sylvester Huck. Although the schoolteacher, James Digby, has a strong influence on Brian O'Connell in Who Has Seen the Wind, it is from his Uncle Sean, not from Digby, that Brian derives his





vocational ambition. In Westerly Wild, Julie Lacoste makes considerable effort to help Carl Solberg achieve his ambition, but the novel ends without revealing whether or not Carl succeeds in going to university. At times the teacher's status as an outsider in the community can be an asset, helping him inspire in his students a yearning for the wider world of learning and experience which the teacher represents. At other times it can be a liability, cutting him off from effective communication with the people of the community.

In some cases the teacher can not act as mentor to a child because the role is already effectively filled by some other adult in the community. When this adult is antagonistic to the teacher, the teacher's influence can be considerably diminished. In W. O. Mitchell's Jake and the Kid, for instance, Jake, the hired man, and Miss Henschbaw, the teacher, compete as figures of intellectual authority in the life of the Kid. Jake has little love for Miss Henschbaw because he is afraid that her strict regard for the truth will discredit him in the eyes of the boy who hero-worships him. The Kid, however, prefers Jake's highly-coloured historical anecdotes, in which the hired man plays a prominent part, to the "mere book-learning" of Miss Henschbaw. Mitchell's humorous account of the rivalry between Jake and Miss Henschbaw serves to illustrate the disadvantage a teacher may be under in trying to influence a young person who is under the ascendancy of an adult in the community who has little regard for education.

In most prairie novels in which the teacher acts as mentor, he serves to nurture the intellectual and artistic aspirations of promising young people hampered by an adverse environment. He also



helps the young person solve personal problems and plan his future.

In more recent novels, however, such as Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many and Robert Hunter's Erebus, the function of the teacher as mentor seems to be undergoing a change. No longer does the teacher strive only to have his protégé develop his intellectual and artistic talents in order to fulfill a potential for personal greatness. Instead, the mentors in these contemporary novels instill a sense of social commitment in their young disciples.

The influence of teachers, in general, is frequently related to community attitudes toward education. The attitude of prairie people toward education can be traced through the fiction of the past half century. In many pioneer communities education is considered, at best, of secondary importance. Greatest status is accorded to the person who is most successful in conquering an adverse environment and making the community productive. Sometimes the school is resented in the pioneer community, particularly by fathers, because it takes the children away from work on the farm. Mothers, on the other hand, who are frequently depicted as having more education than their husbands, tend to value education more highly.

In general, attitudes expressed in fiction indicate that settlers coming to the prairies directly from Europe value education more highly than do those coming from Eastern Canada or the United States. The European immigrant is frequently portrayed as being prepared to make great sacrifices so that his children can acquire an education. He sees education as having the power to free his children from the life of physical toil which their ancestors have had to endure. To improve the



lot in life of their children is a driving force behind most pioneers, but the North American tends to see upward mobility being achieved through the accumulation of material wealth, while the European tends to see it coming through the acquisition of education. Therefore, although the teacher in European immigrant districts often has to teach under much more primitive conditions, he is generally accorded much greater respect.

In pioneer communities the teacher's role is often filled by those ill-equipped to do strenuous physical labour. An example is John Crawford, the schoolteacher in Grove's The Yoke of Life. Crawford, who asserts that "the farmer who has an education is more nearly a complete man than anyone else" (p. 45), turns to teaching instead because of his clubfoot. With a few exceptions, such as Mr. Blaine in Grove's Fruits of the Earth, male teachers do not regard teaching as their life's work. Both James Gilson, a farmer, and Hugh Wentringer, an Oxford graduate, in Arthur Stringer's The Mud Lark, teach briefly as a stop-gap measure when they first come to the West. Many men who later become doctors, lawyers, ministers, or university professors teach for a while in order to work their way through university.

The typical pioneer prairie schoolteacher, however, is a girl in her late teens or early twenties, who teaches for a few years prior to marriage. Some are prairie girls from neighbouring communities; others come from Eastern Canada or Britain for adventure or deliberately to seek a husband. In either case, the local community



sees each new teacher coming into the district as a potential bride for some lonesome farmer. Those who prove unmarriageable fall quickly into the old-maid stereotype. Nellie McClung, in Purple Springs, states that in Normal School the teacher-trainees were imbued with a mission to raise the cultural level of the rural community. Perhaps, in the long run, they did this most effectively by becoming farmer's wives and the mothers of future farmers.

G. Herbert Sallans, in an amusing comment in Little Man, reveals several attributes of the popular stereotype of the schoolteacher during pioneer days on the prairies. He notes among the heterogeneous masses of people at the Winnipeg railway station shortly after the turn of the century, "school teachers just out of college with their textbooks, their ideals, and their sex inhibitions all wrapped together in their imitation leather bags" (p. 38).

Many prairie novels record in part the history of the teacher during the great depression of the 1930's. Salaries of teachers, like the earnings of everyone else, plummeted during those lean years. Dan Root, a beginning teacher, in Christine Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock, who earns forty dollars a month for nine months in 1937, is considered comparatively well-off by some of the district residents. In Vera Lysenko's Westerly Wild, Bertha Schnabel claims that "railway section men are earning more now than the teachers hereabouts" (p. 36). Bertha, who has taught fifteen years on a second-class certificate, earns fifty dollars per month in 1937, while Julie Lacoste, who has five years of teaching experience and a first-class certificate, earns thirty-five dollars per month. In addition, Julie is warned that





Fair Prospect, the district in which she is teaching, is considered one of the poorest schools in southwestern Saskatchewan--the teachers there during the past few years received only the government grant of twenty dollars per month. Among fictional teachers working during the depression, apparently only James Digby, the experienced principal in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind, earns more than "the \$840 per year which the Alberta legislature had long regarded as the threshold of bare existence."<sup>1</sup> Even Digby, though, is concerned that he is not earning enough so that he can afford to get married: "Actually he could offer her very little; one could hardly build up an estate on fourteen hundred a year" (p. 207).

Despite the pitifully low wages, most teachers were lucky just to have a job during the depression. Many, like Arlene Simmons in Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel, became unemployed. Arlene, who has been teaching home economics in the city, is "laid off when they cut down the teaching staff. She can't get another job. There aren't any" (p. 200). During the 1930's, for the first time in the history of the prairies, there was a teacher surplus. Some schools closed because there was no money available to buy supplies and pay the teacher's salary; others closed because the school population dropped as people moved out of the most drought-stricken areas. Ed Hinson, the storekeeper in R. R. Annett's Especialy Babe, suggests that Big Joe should get an unemployed teacher to tutor Little Joe and Babe: "There's teachers out of work--plenty of 'em. If a man like

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<sup>1</sup>John W. Chalmers, Teachers of the Foothills Province (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), p. 109.



that would teach your kids, he'd get a home. . . . He'd be better off than on relief" (p. 28). Miss Hans, adopting the philosophy, "any port in a storm," weathers the depression by acting as house-keeper and tutor for the motherless farm family.

More frequently than in previous years, the teacher during the 1930's is portrayed as having more than the minimum teaching qualifications. Talented young teachers from culturally advantaged homes in prairie cities, such as Julie Lacoste in Lysenko's Westerly Wild and Helen Bendle in Cormack's The House, come to teach in disadvantaged rural areas. Other teachers, such as Dan Root in Van der Mark's Honey in the Rock and Bertha Schnabel in Lysenko's Westerly Wild, fervently desire a university education, but the economic conditions make it exceedingly difficult for them to attain it, especially if they are burdened by family responsibilities.

With the advent of the Second World War, the teacher surplus which characterized the depression came to an end. Many married teachers returned to the classroom. In fact, it is not until this era that the married teacher as a fictional character becomes at all common. Because of the teacher shortage during and following the war, school-boards could no longer be as selective in their hiring practices. As indicated by the case of Gale Anderson in McCourt's Home is the Stranger, the teacher shortage also prevented the local community from exerting such a strict censorship of the teacher's personal life.

The post-war era on the prairies has been characterized by increased urbanization and centralization of schools. Prairie novelists, however, have not followed the trend of the population in



general; they have seldom turned to large urban communities for settings for their novels. With the exception of such recent novels as Robert Hunter's Erebus (1968) and June Bhatia's The Latchkey Kid (1971), the prairie novelist has been content to deal with rural or village settings, usually a generation or two in the past. A number of contemporary writers have turned to the more recent frontier areas, such as the Peace River country (Christine Van der Mark and Sheila MacKay Russell), or to isolated areas in the northern part of the prairie provinces to deal with the problems of Indian communities (Harrison, Step Softly on the Beaver; Wiebe, Peace Shall Destroy Many; Kristofferson, Tanya; and Forer, The Humback). Thus far there has been no detailed fictional treatment in prairie literature to correspond with Selwyn Dewdney's Wind Without Rain, a novel set in Western Ontario which has the conflicts within a large urban school as its central focus.

One of the few generalizations that can be drawn from novels with a more recent setting is that fictional teachers like teachers in actual life are becoming more highly trained. Both David in Neufeld's Aurora and Agnes Miller in Sheila MacKay Russell's The Living Earth have master's degrees and a number of other fictional teachers have bachelor's degrees.

A major change in public attitude toward education is noted in June Bhatia's recent novel, The Latchkey Kid (1971). Earlier novels indicate that there is a strong element of anti-intellectualism on the Canadian prairies. In pioneer times, for instance, a man was judged not by his intellect, but by the amount he could produce and





the work he could do. Bhatia notes, however, that in today's society a person is not even allowed an opportunity to prove what he can do unless he has a grade twelve education. Great pressure is exerted on young people to get an education--not because learning is of value in itself, but because formal education is considered a prerequisite to economic security. Apparently anti-intellectualism has not disappeared; it has just donned a new disguise.

Throughout the past fifty years, the teacher in Canadian prairie fiction has typically been portrayed as an outsider in the community. There are a number of reasons for this phenomenon. Often the prairie teacher is a foreigner in a community of people from a different ethnic or socio-economic background and is almost always a newcomer to the particular community in which he teaches. In some cases he may be regarded as a threat to the values of the community; in other cases he may be suspected of having a condescending attitude to the people of the community. As illustrated in Lysenko's Westerly Wind, the teacher may also have difficulty in being fully accepted in an economically depressed district if he has the means to escape from the more appalling aspects of destitution, while the district residents have not. The greatest deterrent to teachers becoming a real part of the prairie community, however, is their typical short tenure in any one place. The three most common types of teachers depicted by novelists are young girls who teach for a few years prior to marrying, men who teach briefly before turning to more prestigious occupations, and frustrated old maids who move from district to district in search of the lost opportunities of their youth or because



of pedagogical deficiencies. Even those teachers who regard teaching as their life's work tend to move frequently in order to progress in their profession. The unofficial status of non-administrative teaching positions seems to be determined by a number of factors, including the size of the school and the population center in which it is located, the age of the students taught, and the degree of specialization allowed the teacher.

A teacher's brief tenure in a school, however, may not always be attributed to his desire to seek a better position. It may be the result of community dissatisfaction with the incumbent or preference for another teacher. In prairie fiction more teachers are rejected on "moral" grounds than for any other reason, including teaching incompetence. A teacher in Stringer's The Mud Lark is fired because she smoked in her classroom; David in Neufeld's Aurora loses popularity because of his political activity; Ann Foster in Kerr's Gay Dogs and Dark Horses is forced to resign because she goes horseback riding at the farm of a disreputable bachelor on Sundays; and a young male teacher in Cormack's Local Rag is "sent packing" because he pays too much attention to the older girls in his class. Fiction provides some indication that community mores regarding the private life of the teacher are loosening. In several novels written during the past few years, for example, teachers are depicted drinking openly in beer parlours--something which fictional teachers in earlier days were seldom pictured as doing.

Occasionally the teacher in prairie fiction is in danger of losing his position because an influential member of the school board



wishes a personal friend or relative to have the job. As Chalmers documents in his history of the Alberta Teachers' Association, this situation was not limited to fiction.<sup>2</sup> There is no mention of teachers' professional organizations in novels of the prairies, and in most conflicts between teachers and school boards the teacher is at the mercy of the board. In several instances of conflict, however, such as in Mitchell's Jake and the Kid and in Cormack's Local Rag, enough community support is mustered to prevent a teacher from being dismissed.

A number of factors revealed in prairie fiction seem to have militated against teachers acquiring high status. As mentioned earlier, the teaching role in pioneer districts is often filled by those considered unfit to do more economically productive work, by those who do not intend to make teaching their permanent occupation, and by those who have little or no training. Typically brief tenure prevents the teacher from having much long-term influence. In addition, the fact that the local board has virtual control over the teacher's private as well as professional life makes him a pawn in community politics and a prey to the whims and caprices of influential members of the community.

Usually the teacher is an outsider in the community, but he is not necessarily a "loner." His companions are typically other border-line professionals who share the teacher's intellectual interests and his marginal status in the community. Where the teacher does become an active member of the community, it is often because of his

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<sup>2</sup>Chalmers, Teachers of the Foothills Province, pp. 109-111.



willingness to do church or community service work or to organize and participate in athletics. Occasionally a teacher in a small village or rural community remains long enough in the district to be considered an established community member.

In one of the few prairie novels set in an urban community in the 1960's, June Bhatia, the author of The Latchkey Kid, suggests that the status of the teacher as an outsider has undergone a change. Two teachers in this novel, Miss Angus and Mr. Dixon, participate in the social and cultural activities of the status-seeking middle class which forms the social elite in the fictional Alberta city of Tollemarche. As a greater body of urban prairie fiction accumulates in the future, it will be interesting to see whether Mrs. Bhatia's portrayal of teachers as established members of the middle class will be borne out by other novelists.

At the present time an overview of the fiction of the past fifty years suggests that the status of the teacher in Western Canada has not definitely crystalized. The indefiniteness in this regard is attributable to several factors. First, the communities in which fictional teachers serve are made up of people of many ethnic groups each of which has its own attitude toward the status of teachers. Both Margaret Laurence and June Bhatia indicate through their novels that it is only in the present generation that socio-economic factors have begun to replace ethnic origin as a source of status in Western Canada. If this is true, then it is likely that a more unified view concerning the role of the teacher will also emerge among Western Canadians.





Secondly, the role of the teacher in Western Canada has been filled by people with a wide diversity of backgrounds and training. Particularly during the first half of the century, education was frequently not regarded as a profession either by teachers or by the public. Rather, it was considered a convenient stepping stone to one of the "true" professions or to a career in the business world. A commonly held view among educators is that as more teachers become professionally qualified and regard teaching as their life's work the status of the teaching profession will rise. While this view may be accurate, prairie novelists suggest that a teacher's attitude and personality are also extremely important. A teacher must be respected as an individual if he is to be respected as a teacher. Thus the quality of the individuals attracted to the profession appears to be an even greater determinant of the status of teaching than years of professional training or salary earned.

An additional factor to consider in assessing the image of the teacher in Canadian prairie fiction is that approximately half of the teacher characters have been created by authors who themselves are or were teachers. A number of generalizations can be made regarding the different images reflected in novels written by authors with and without teaching experience. The most obvious difference is that the author with teaching experience more often chooses the point of view of the teacher. A notable exception, however, is A Jest of God, a novel narrated through the stream-of-consciousness of a teacher, but written by a non-teacher, Margaret Laurence.

Teacher characterization also tends to vary to some extent



depending on whether or not the author has been a teacher. Almost invariably, novels with beautiful, idealistic young teachers as protagonists are written by female novelists with teaching experience. Examples are Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese, Nellie McClung's Purple Springs, Gabrielle Roy's Street of Riches, Barbara Villy Cormack's The House, and Vera Lysenko's Westerly Wild. In this type of novel the teacher is usually a romantic heroine. This does not imply, of course, that female teacher-authors write only about teachers as romantic heroines--Miss Glover, for example, in Kristine Kristofferson's Tanya is notably unsuccessful in her romantic endeavours. Female authors with teaching experience, however, seldom depict teachers in either the romantic siren role or the old maid stereotype. The teacher as romantic siren is most often portrayed by male authors (e.g. Opaly Grenn in W. A. S. Tegart's In the Face of the Winds, Ruth Lancaster in Frank Harrison's Step Softly on the Beaver, Alsina Teeswater in Arthur Stringer's The Prairie Child, Gail Anderson in Ed McCourt's Home is the Stranger, and Razia Tantamount in Rudy Wiebe's Peace Shall Destroy Many). The old-maid schoolteacher as a stock, stereotyped minor character is found most frequently in the writing of male authors (both teachers and non-teachers); while the more psychologically penetrating explorations of the teacher's struggle to avoid the encroachment of the old maid stereotype have been written by female novelists who are not teachers, Margaret Laurence in A Jest of God and Sheila Mackay Russell in The Living Earth.

A marked difference also exists between the novels of teacher and non-teacher authors in the way they portray the teacher in the



classroom. As might be expected, authors with teaching experience make use of classroom settings far more frequently. Non-teachers are more likely to make generalizations about the quality of a character's teaching ability than to illustrate it, whereas teachers frequently use the novel to exemplify desirable pedagogical practices. Authors with teaching experience also have their characters consider questions of educational philosophy more frequently than do authors who have had no teaching experience. Classroom episodes in novels by non-teachers are usually limited to scenes of conflict, usually shown from the point of view of the pupil. Teacher-student conflicts in novels written by teachers are sometimes, but certainly not always, sympathetic to the point of view of the teacher. One of the most unsympathetic treatments of teacher-student conflict is Prairie Harvest written by Arthur Storey, a former public school teacher who is now a professor of educational psychology.

A consideration of the teacher in the community also reveals differences in novels written by authors with and without teaching experience. Frederick Philip Grove, for example, reveals his teacher's bias in Fruits of the Earth when he expresses resentment that every ratepayer, no matter how unqualified, feels entitled to a share in running the school in a rural district of the West. Most of the novels in which teacher-characters feel personally repressed by community social norms are written by teachers, as are novels in which attempted dismissal of a teacher takes on dramatic significance. Teacher-authors also frequently depict the teacher in the role of culture-bearer to a culturally deprived district.





Authors, both with and without teaching experience, provide valuable information regarding community attitudes towards teachers. Many non-teacher as well as teacher authors see the fictional teacher as a rather lonely figure in the community; however, authors who are clergymen, such as R. L. McTavish in For a Better Tomorrow and E. H. Oliver in Beaver Lodge, show the teacher as having an important influence in the community through church and community service work.

Authors who are academics with no public school teaching experience tend to portray the teacher quite negatively. For example, in Ed McCourt's Fasting Friar Mr. Wardle is referred to as "an elementary teacher of great timidity and gross incompetence" (p. 32). In Music at the Close Miss Piggott is a completely uninspiring old-maid schoolteacher; Andy Kane, the principal, is considered unapproachable by an adolescent interested in furthering his education; and Moira Glenn's husband wonders whether she married him in order to escape "the drudgery of school-teaching" (p. 171). In Home is the Stranger Mr. Laughlin, a former teacher, is an escapee from an asylum, his mental problems having stemmed from accusations that he had molested a little girl in his class.

Another academic, Paul Hiebert, in his delightful little satire, Sarah Binks, has provided one of the few completely humorous portrayals of a teacher in prairie fiction. Like all the other characters in Sarah Binks, the teacher William Greenglow is created for comic effect. Even to a greater extent than W. O. Mitchell's Miss Henchbaw in Jake and the Kid, Greenglow is caricatured. In prairie fiction in general, however, the teacher is seldom presented in a



purely comic role. Perhaps this fact is not surprising, since prairie fiction frequently tends to be quite serious and realistic.

Because of its realistic nature, prairie fiction provides many insights into the values, attitudes, and experiences of the prairie people and of those who have served them as teachers from the pioneer past to the present. However, as Julie Lacoste in Vera Lysenko's Westerly Wild indicates, no work of fiction as yet written records the complete story of the prairie teacher:

"I sometimes think the prairie provinces were built up by the labours of pioneer teachers," Julie would think on such a morning. As she recalled all those hopeful young Normal School graduates going out to teach in the bush country of Manitoba or the Dust Bowl of Saskatchewan, some of them mere slips of girls stranded alone in bachelor shacks in communities of alien people, she wondered that so many had survived at all, and had stuck it out, alongside the people, through droughts, frosts, hail and snowstorms. "Nobody has written their story, really," she thought. "Not the way it was."  
(p. 173)



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